

JESUS:

SUFFERING SERVANT,
SOVEREIGN LORD

Stephen V. Rees



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JESUS: SUFFERING SERVANT, SOVEREIGN LORD

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PREFACE

These sermons, given by Stephen Rees at various conferences around the world, are full of Christ, and because of that they should do you good – in fact, they should change you, so you are more like Christ! They are also excellent examples of how to handle the Word of God correctly, so that God’s voice is truly heard. (Such examples are greatly needed today, when so many twist the Bible to try and make it say whatever they want it to say.) These sermons expound a number of wonderful passages from various parts of the Bible. By looking at each passage in its original historical situation and literary context, the true meaning, in all its richness and relevance for today’s churches, is brought to light and applied to the reader. This, therefore, is Biblical exposition at its best.

I have had the privilege of not only reading and benefiting from these sermons myself, but also of seeing many others benefit from them. I have used them over the last few years, with a great number of students, in the various courses I teach at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (now part of Africa International University). Whenever I have taught Old Testament Prophets, Pauline Epistles, Biblical Theology, Theology of Christ and Salvation or Bible Interpretation, the students have received these sermons to read, for their own instruction and edification. Time and time again, the students have commented on what a blessing these sermons have been, not only to them personally, but also in enriching their ministries.

These seven papers are now compiled and produced in a book, with the hope that as they are read, you will rejoice afresh in the greatness of our God, and the grace that has been shown to us in Jesus, the Suffering Servant and Sovereign Lord.

To God be the Glory!

Martin K. Bussey

AFRICA CHRISTIAN TEXTBOOKS
NAIROBI, KENYA

1

THE SERVANT SONGS:

THE LORD'S SERVANT: HIS MISSION

ISAIAH 42:1-9

We are looking at four passages from the second half of the book of Isaiah, four passages which are often known as the four Servant Songs. These passages all speak of a mysterious figure who is identified as the Lord's servant. They give us perhaps the clearest picture we have of the Lord Jesus anywhere in the Old Testament. Our prayer is that as we meditate on these familiar passages together, the Holy Spirit will be opening our eyes to see something of the majesty and beauty of the Lord Jesus.

If you look at the opening words of Isaiah 42, you will see that there the Lord himself is speaking. And he is speaking about his servant – “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.” The Lord

Jehovah brings his servant onto the scene and presents him to our view.

Now there is some debate among commentators about where each of the Servant Songs begins and finishes. Most people would agree that the first Servant Song stretches from chapter 42 verse 1 to verse 9. And I would accept that. But if we are going to understand this first servant song rightly, then we must put it in the context of the previous chapters, chapters 40 and 41. Ideally, we would want to sketch out the structure and message of this whole section of Isaiah – from chapter 40 onward – and then see how each of the servant songs fits into that structure, but we do not have time for that. Again, I am going to say almost nothing about the historical background of these servant-songs – the way they relate to the Babylonian exile, and the return. There are so many things we just cannot touch on. But we can at least root this first servant song into its immediate context.

So look back to Isaiah 40. It is a very dramatic chapter. It presents us with a most awesome and majestic vision of God. And it does so with a series of questions. Verse 12: “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket?” Verse 13: “Who has understood the mind of the Lord? Who was it that taught him knowledge?” And all of these questions are leading up to one climactic question. Verse 18: “To whom will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, a goldsmith overlays it with gold...” And the question is repeated then in verse 25: “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal, says the Holy One”.

That is the great challenge, the great issue. It is the living God, the sovereign God claiming his sovereign rights over against the idols that men and women worship. How dare you compare them to me? How dare you call them Gods? “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name...” Verse 28: “Do you not know, have you not heard, the LORD – Jehovah – he is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” How dare you worship any other “god”?! How dare you bow down and pay honour to things your own hands have made? How dare you rob me of my glory and give it to the idols that you have constructed for yourselves? The whole chapter is God’s indictment of the wicked folly of men and women who turn away from the living God to worship the gods of their own imagination.

And then chapter 41 develops that theme – and it does so in a most remarkable way. Look at the opening verses of chapter 41. This is God speaking – and God is calling all the nations together: “Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the court of judgement...” God summons all the nations of the world – the people of the most distant islands – and he calls us to meet him at the place of judgement – in other words, at the law court.

In Isaiah’s day, the law courts operated rather differently from the way they do in some countries today. There was no public prosecutor. It was up to a man who thought he had been wronged to bring his case to the court. You can imagine a man who believes he has been cheated by

his neighbour. And he summons his neighbour to meet him before the judges – usually the elders of the village. And the two men argue it out. The first man brings his complaint – “This man has cheated me”. And the second man brings his counter-complaint: “This man is lying; he is slandering me”. It is direct confrontation between the two parties. Each of them must argue their case. They can question one another; they can call witnesses – and at the end the judges will declare that one of them is right and the other is wrong.

GOD’S COMPLAINT

Now in Isaiah chapter 41 what we have got is this. We have got God calling all the people of the world to meet him at the law court. There is going to be a trial – and the parties in this case are God on one side, and us, his creatures, on the other. Do you see what a dramatic picture it is? God has a complaint to bring. God says, “I have been wronged – by you – the nations of the world – and I want justice”. That is what God is saying. So he sends out the summons. The people of the world must come to the place of judgement. They must be silent while God makes his complaint. And then, if they have anything to say, “Let them come forward and speak”. Direct confrontation; God accusing us – the people of the world – of wronging him; the people of the world trying to defend themselves – trying to make excuses – trying to argue back against God.

You see – we are used to thinking about God as the judge who judges us. But here we have got something a bit different. God is not so much seen as the judge here.

Rather, he is the person making the complaint – what we call the plaintiff.

Now, what is the particular complaint that God has to make against the nations of the world? Well, that becomes clear as you read on through chapter 41. From verse 2 to verse 20, you have got, as it were, God’s opening speech in this case. Again he begins with a series of questions – and again all the questions are intended to show that he alone is the Sovereign God, the controller of history, the one who has acted in the past and who ordains the future. And then in verse 21, he puts his challenge to us – to the people of the world – to the human race: “Present your case,” says the Lord, Jehovah. “Set forth your arguments,” says Jacob’s king. “Bring in your idols, to tell us what is going to happen.”

That is what this case is all about. That is the accusation – that we have failed to acknowledge God as God – that we have failed to recognise his sovereignty, his power, his majesty – and that we have worshipped idols instead. That is God’s complaint – that we have robbed him of the honour that is his by right – that we have worshipped idols instead of worshipping him. So he says, “Bring in your idols” – let us see the things you worship – let us see what they can actually do – can they tell us the future – what’s going to happen? Can they explain the past? Can they do *anything*? Verse 23, “Do something, whether good or bad!” But no, verse 24, “You are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless”. These things you worship, they are worthless, they are useless. And yet you choose them – you treat them as if they are so important – and meanwhile you ignore me – you sideline me – you

forget that I am the infinite the Almighty, the Lord of time and eternity. You act as if you owe me nothing.

Look at the last verse of the chapter – the way God condemns all those who worship idols: “See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing, their images are but wind and confusion.”

So that was the accusation – the charge that God brought against men and women in Isaiah’s day. God could have accused them of many crimes – of lying, of murder, of adultery. But from God’s point of view, these were not their most serious offences. The most serious crime of all, the most wicked thing they have done, is this: they have not worshipped God with all their heart – instead they have given their loyalty and their trust to worthless idols.

MAN’S GREATEST SIN

Now it is so important to stress this in the present day, when so many people think of sin chiefly in terms of the wrong men and women do to one another. Here we see that God’s primary accusation against human beings is not that they have wronged one another, but that they have wronged him. Isaiah is showing us in the most dramatic form the same truth that Paul argues so devastatingly in Romans 1. Godlessness comes before wickedness. What is mankind’s chief crime? They suppress the truth in their wickedness. They refuse to see the truth about God which is written across creation. They neither glorify him as God nor give thanks to him. They turn away from the glory of the immortal God and choose instead to worship images

made to look like men and birds and animals and reptiles. They exchange the truth of God for a lie. They worship and serve created things rather than the Creator. They do not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God.

There is no crime, no wickedness that compares with that. It is the fundamental crime of mankind from the Garden of Eden to today: that men and women will not give to God the glory that is due to him. They will worship *anything*, rather than submit to this infinite eternal, unchangeable Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

All other crimes flow from that. That is Paul's argument in Romans 1. It is *because* they refused to give God glory that God gave them over to sexual impurity. It is *because* they worshipped created things that they were given over to shameful lusts. It is *because* they were not willing to have God in their thoughts that God gave them over to a depraved mind, filled with every kind of wickedness, greed and depravity.

What I am saying is this. We need to return to a *God-centred* understanding of the doctrine of sin. When we talk about sin, we can say many true things, many important things, but if we leave *this* out, then we are leaving out the most important thing of all – we are betraying the honour of God himself. We are allowing people to believe that sins against other human beings are more serious than sin against God. When we are talking about sin, we have always got to remember that the worst sin of all, the most dreadful crime that human beings commit is that they fail to give God the honour that is due to him. Yes, we preach all God's commandments, but we never forget that the greatest commandment is this – you shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And we never forget that the worst sin in the world is to break that commandment – to rob God of the love, the devotion, the worship that is due to him. The worst crime in the world is to put any created thing in the place of the Creator – to look for satisfaction or security or comfort or certainty anywhere but in the Infinite and Eternal God. Isaiah speaks of people who worship idols of silver or gold or wood. Often we are preaching to people who worship family or friends or money or career or health or the body beautiful or a particular political order. But the fundamental indictment is the same – God says to men and women in Isaiah’s generation – and in every generation – you have robbed me. You have taken created things and put them in my place. You have closed your eyes to my glory and set up your own pathetic little idols in my place.

WHAT GOD THINKS OF IDOLATRY

Very quickly, just notice three things the Lord has to say about man’s idolatry here in Isaiah 41. I am only giving you headings. I have no time to develop these things. But first he tells us *idolatry is universal*. All nations are called to that courtroom – and that includes the islands, the people living at the furthest ends of the earth (verse 5). But instead of rebuking one another for their idolatry, they support and encourage one another in their false worship: verse 6: “each helps the other and says to his brother, “be strong”. The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, one smith spurs on another...” This is man’s great conspiracy against

God – it underlies all the world religions, all the great philosophies, it is at the root of every political system and every economic enterprise. At the heart of them all is man's attempt to shake off his dependence upon his Creator and to find security and meaning in created things. You often hear – or I often hear – people talking about man's search for God. It is nonsense. Mankind is not searching for God – man is searching for ways to replace God – so one man makes an idol and another says, "It is good".

Secondly, *idolatry is stupid*. How Isaiah mocks the folly, the stupidity of people who look to anything but God himself for security. The idols need to be nailed down – verse 7 – in case they fall over. And yet people still look to them for protection and peace of mind. You can hear the sarcasm in Isaiah's voice – in verses 22 and 23 – "Go on," he says to the idols, "Do something – anything – good or bad – so that we will be dismayed or filled with fear..." Why can people not see it? Why can people not see that these gods they have made with their own hands – these gods that they need to clean and polish and look after – are worthless? Because they are blind – wilfully blind – they have chosen to be stupid. "When men cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything."

The idols of money, or sex, or education, or science or politics – you would think that with the passing years, centuries, millennia, people would realise that these things cannot satisfy, cannot save. But no – there is an impenetrable blindness, a huge stupidity that grips the minds of men and women everywhere. So they carry on looking to created things and closing their eyes to God the Creator.

Idolatry is stupid. And then, thirdly, *idolatry is wicked*. That has been the whole thrust of the LORD's argument so far. And it is summed up in that one sentence in verse 24: "he who chooses you is detestable". He who chooses you is an abomination. Let me say it again. What is the worst sin a man or a woman can commit? Murder? Rape? Child abuse? No. These are all great wickednesses – but the worst sin in the world is this: not to worship God with all your heart; to put something, anything in the place that is his by right.

GOD'S GREAT CONCERN

Now, faced with the stupidity and the wickedness of human idolatry, what is God's great concern? Well, in the light of Isaiah chapter 41, the answer is quite clear. It is to vindicate his own honour. God initiates this court case because he is determined to defend his own honour. He is determined to make these foolish, wicked people see the truth. He is fighting for his rights. He is not willing to be slandered any longer, ignored, robbed of his glory. He is determined that people will see the truth and admit the truth – that they will throw away their idols and admit that he is in the right. He is determined that they will give to him the honour, the worship that is his by right. God is concerned for his own glory.

Now once again, this cuts across so much of our modern evangelicalism, with its man-centred set of priorities. What motivates us? What is our great concern? What makes us tick? What is our great priority? Is it to build a better world? Is it to help people find healing and

happiness? Is it to lead people to fulfilment and peace of mind? Is it that we want people to be forgiven for their sins and to escape the horrors of hell?

Those are surely right objectives. But is that where we begin? Is that where God begins? Why does God call the nations of the world into his courtroom? Is it for *their* sake? No. God's great concern is for *his own glory*. That is the unmistakable message of this chapter. The reason we work, the reason we preach, the reason we call men and women to repentance is because we share God's great concern. We cannot bear to see God robbed of his glory. We cannot bear to see men and women ignoring God and giving their hearts to empty idols.

As you read on through these chapters of Isaiah, that is the note that comes pulsing through chapter after chapter – God's concern for his own glory. "I am the Lord and there is no other; apart from me there is no god... men must know that there is none beside me, I am the Lord and there is no other... My glory I will not give to another... By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked; before me every knee shall bow; by me every tongue will swear... To whom will you compare me?"

That is why God calls these people into his courtroom. They must be confronted. They must be forced to see their stupidity and their wickedness. They must be forced to their knees before their Creator. They must not be allowed to rob God any longer of the glory that is due to him.

Now, have you got the picture? Can you see the court-case as Isaiah describes it? On the one side you have the human race; people everywhere blindly worshipping their

futile idols. Some of them are *respectable idols*: education, culture, “my family”, “my self-respect”, my church, my ministry. Some of them are *shameful idols*: perversion, drunkenness, greed. Some of them are *trivial idols*: TV, sport, but all of them are empty; all of them are a cheat; all of them will pass away; all of them are wicked; none of them are worthy to be worshipped.

And on the other side you have God, bringing his accusation against the human race, saying, “You have robbed me; you have insulted me. You have worshipped your home and you never cared that it was me who gave you your home. You have worshipped your health and never gave thanks to me who gave you your health. You have worshipped imaginary characters in a TV drama and you have ignored me, the true and living God to whom you owe everything.”

So we have God rebuking, God confronting, God defending his honour, God claiming his rights. That is the court-case Isaiah describes. That is the scene.

And it is into that scene that the servant steps forward. The scene is set; the courtroom is full. And suddenly a new figure steps into the courtroom. And the Lord lifts up his hand and the courtroom is hushed, and the Lord says, “Ah, here is my servant”.

THE LORD’S SERVANT

That then is the context in which Jesus Christ, the Servant of the Lord is introduced to us. I have taken a long time to get to that point but I do believe it is vital to see

that. He is going to play a crucial role in this court-case that Isaiah has been describing.

What is the most important word in the first four verses of chapter 42? Well, it is not difficult to see, is it? There is one word that is repeated three times over. The Lord is speaking about his servant. And he says in the last line of verse 1, “he will bring *justice* to the nations. And then again in verse 3, “in faithfulness he will bring forth *justice*”. And then again in verse 4, “he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes *justice* on earth.” You see, chapter 41 flows straight on into chapter 42. This is still the language of the lawcourt. The word translated “justice” here, really means “verdict – a just verdict”. What is the mission for which the servant has been sent? What is his great objective? He will bring justice to the nations. He will bring in the right verdict in this lawcase. He will persuade people of the truth. He will force them to see that God has been in the right all along – and that they have been in the wrong. He will show them that the idols they have worshipped are wicked and stupid and that the Lord alone is to be loved and honoured. He is determined – verse 4 – to establish justice on earth – to compel men and women everywhere to submit to the rightful verdict. The continents, the islands must listen to him. In his law, his torah, the islands will put their hope.

We asked earlier, “What is our great objective, our chief concern? What is to be the great priority of ministers of God?” Now let us ask the question in a different way. What was Jesus Christ’s great objective as he came into this world? He comes as the Lord’s servant. But what did he see as the supreme goal, the final end of his service? And

this passage tells us. He came to defend the honour and glory of his Father. In this great history-long controversy between God and men, he came to assert the Sovereign rights of Jehovah. He came to turn men from idols to serve the living God. That is his mission.

And that must be the mission then of every one who claims to be a servant of the Servant. Do you remember Paul in Athens? Paul is waiting for his friends in Athens and he begins to explore the city. And “he was greatly distressed to see the city that the city was full of idols”. And so what does he do? He begins to preach to Jews, to Gentiles, to philosophers, to pagans. And what does he preach? He preaches God, the God who made the world and everything in it, the God who is the Lord of heaven and earth, the God who needs nothing that human hands can give, the God who himself gives all men life and breath and everything else, the God who made every nation of men, the God who determined the flow of history and the migration of peoples, the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the God who will judge the world with justice, the God who raised Jesus from the dead. He preaches God, the Sovereign Creator, Lord, and Judge. He demands that all men repent and give to this God the honour and glory that are due to him. As a messenger of Jesus Christ he demands that men submit to the righteous verdict – God is in the right; they are in the wrong. Paul is driven by that burning concern for the glory of God.

Now in what remains of our time, let us move swiftly through the nine verses of this first servant song. We have seen the nature of the mission to which the Servant is called.

Now I want us to see (1) the way the Servant is equipped for that mission; (2) the way the Servant performs his mission (3) the way the Servant completes his mission.

HOW THE SERVANT IS EQUIPPED FOR HIS MISSION

Firstly, *the way the servant is equipped for his mission*. Verse 1: “Here is my servant whom I uphold...” The servant lives every moment of every day in dependence upon his God, his Father, his Lord. And God holds him fast. It is a strong word. God says, “I have him in my grip”. The servant spends all his life gripped by God, guided by God, used by God, empowered by God. He is *God’s chosen one, in whom he delights*. We recognise these words as the words spoken from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. “You are my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I delight”. That is God’s verdict on the Lord Jesus, the Servant. Here at last is someone who is utterly different from all other men. Here is someone who has never worshipped the false gods. His one thought day and night has been to serve his God, to bring him honour, to obey him. His God has been more important to him than comfort or pain, sorrow or joy. He has been the chosen servant of the Lord, always at the Lord’s command, always at the Lord’s disposal, never thinking of himself, always thinking of the Lord to whom he has given himself in willing service. Everything this servant does pleases God and brings him delight. The way he works and the way he rests – the way he sleeps and the way he rises – the way he feeds and the way he fasts – in all his actions, in all his words, in all his thoughts, in all his choices, he pleases God. God can say “I delight in him”.

And that is his equipping. How is Jesus Christ equipped for the mission to which he is sent? Yes, as a man, he has great natural gifts – he has huge physical energy, he has resilience, he is an orator, he is a genius. But that is not the explanation of his achievements. What equips him to be God’s servant in the world – to carry through God’s purposes? It is simply this – that he is willing to be unreservedly, a servant. He gives himself to total, unquestioning, loving slavery. He sees himself as a servant every moment. His one thought night and day is to serve his Lord, to bring him honour, to obey him. He can say, “I always do the things that please him”. He is a man utterly filled with the Spirit of God. “I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring the verdict to the nations”. At his baptism, the Lord Jesus is anointed with the Spirit of God. He is led by the Spirit, taught by the Spirit. It is in the power of the Spirit that he preaches and prays and pastors his people.

This is the equipping we need. I see a generation of evangelical leaders who are obsessed with techniques. Every week I get mail from different Christian organisations promising to teach me the skills of effective leadership. I am invited to seminars, where experts in communication will show me how to be contemporary and relevant. I can hire videos which will teach me how to win people for the kingdom in three easy steps. I can attend conferences where Christian psychologists will teach me how to be a dynamic leader.

Well, maybe these things might be useful. But I tell you, it is not what I need. What I need is not to learn how to be a *leader*. It is to learn how to be a *servant*. It is to learn

what it means to live in constant, willing, loving obedience to my God. That is what I need – to be the sort of man of whom God can say: “I hold him fast, I have chosen him – and I am well pleased with him”. What I need is more of the Holy Spirit, teaching me the mind of God, renewing in me the image of God, imparting his own holiness to me.

Do you want to be equipped for mission in the 21st century? What is to be our equipment? A life of constant unquestioning obedience to the commands of God. A life lived close to God. A life lived in the presence of God. A life of daily intimacy with God, a life filled with the Spirit of God. This was Christ’s life – and this is to be our life in Christ.

HOW THE SERVANT PERFORMS HIS MISSION

And then secondly, *the way the Servant performs his mission*. Verse 2: “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets”. Read the gospels and look again at Jesus the Servant of the Lord. He is always busy, always under pressure, always faced with new demands. People are constantly demanding his attention. Enemies are waiting on his every word ready to trip him up. Friends and disciples are saying foolish things. There are disappointments, hurts, weariness, heartbreaks. There is so much work to be done while it is still day. And yet see how calm this man is. There is a quietness, a restraint, that marks him as he walks through the crowds. He never panics, never loses control, never comes to pieces.

What is the secret? Well, it is simply this: he is the Servant. He is living every moment in obedience, in dependence

upon his God. He is doing the work that God has given him to do, letting the plans of God unfold moment by moment. If unexpected tasks are suddenly given to him, then those are tasks his God has prepared for him. Why then should he panic? If his God has given him the task, then his God will give him the time and the strength and the resources to complete it. His role is simply to obey, to trust, to finish the task his Father has given him to do. How does he perform his mission? Quietly, calmly, trustingly. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out”. Again, look at the Jesus of the gospels and remember the bruised reed people, the smoking wick people he has to deal with. Look at the disciples: so foolish, so slow to learn, so full of doubts and unbelief. And see how patiently, how gently the Lord Jesus can deal with their follies and their mistakes and their sins. Yes, there were times when he might have asked: “Is there any point in trying to keep this little light alive?” But no, he takes the smoking wick and keeps the flame burning, and tends it and trims it. Again, what gives him that sort of patience with people? It is this: he is a servant and if these are the sort of people his God has given him to care for, then he must care for them. He must care for the awkward and the lazy and the stupid. He is a servant and this is the work he has been given to do. He is determined that when he comes to the end of his course, he will be able to say, “Those you have given me, I have kept.., none has been lost, except the one doomed to destruction”. How does the Servant perform his mission? With huge patience and forbearance.

“In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged”. Once again, look at Jesus the

Servant. And think of the discouragements he faced in his mission. “On hearing this, many of his disciples said ‘this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ And from this time they turned back and no longer followed him.” Are you a pastor? If so, have you had the experience of a divided church? You have worked and prayed for ten years, for twenty years, and slowly you have seen the work grow. And then suddenly, all that patient work is lost overnight, or so it seems. The Lord Jesus had that experience. One day he had a crowd of 5,000 clamouring to make him king; the next day, a congregation of eleven once more.

What about that last mission to Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, recorded in John chapters 7 to 10. How the Lord Jesus loved that city! And how did that mission end after all the preaching, all the miracles, all the patient debating with the Jewish leaders? “Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him... Again they tried to seize him...”

And then think about that dreadful last night in the garden, when at last his disciples turn and flee and Jesus is left alone in the hands of his enemies. What is there now to show for three years of backbreaking labour, of constant prayer, of sacrificial obedience

Some of you are pastors and have faced great disappointments, great discouragements and hurts in the work of the ministry. But have any of you ever experienced the setbacks, the failures, the bewildering providences that Jesus the Servant knew?

And yet we read, “he did not falter or be discouraged”. He pressed on. When the crowds left him, when the Jewish leaders rejected him, when his own friends abandoned

him, he pressed on. And again we ask “Why?” And again the answer is, “Because he was the Servant”. And a servant has only one responsibility: to be faithful, to do the work he is been given to do, believing that his Master knows best. How did the Servant perform his mission? With unfailing courage, with great determination; a courage, a determination born out of obedience and trust.

HOW THE SERVANT COMPLETES HIS MISSION

And then finally, let us consider *the way the Servant completes his mission*. And we will sum it up in one word: infallibly. He will not, he cannot, fail. Look at verse 5:

“This is what God the Lord says – he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who stretched out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it, I the LORD have called you in righteousness, I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you...”

The Servant cannot fail. Why? Because the Infinite God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Sustainer of mankind, Controller of history is working with him, through him, for him. This one fragile man, Jesus Christ, this carpenter’s son, this homeless wanderer, this lonely, hurting, frightened man sobbing his heart out in the garden, this naked, broken figure on a cross: he will complete the work the Father has given him to do. He will carry through all the purposes of God. The LORD has chosen him, and called him, and takes him by the hand and keeps him. The Lord will make him a covenant for the people. Through him,

God's true Israel will return to their covenant obedience. The Lord will make him a light for the Gentiles. The light of truth will break into the darkness of idolatry. He will open the eyes that are blind, he will free captives from the prison. He will release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. Idolatry is darkness. It is blindness. It is captivity and shame. But the Servant's mission is accomplished. He will turn men and women of every nation from their idols to serve the living God.

The Servant cannot fail. He can be attacked by his enemies and deserted by his friends. He can be beaten and spat upon. He can be laughed at and forced to drag his cross through the streets. He can be stripped naked and left to hang on a cross. He can die a humiliating and lonely death alone in the darkness. But he cannot fail, because his obedience does not fail. And by his obedience, he will accomplish all that the Father has purposed. Verse 8: "I am the LORD; that is my name. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols".

What is the mission of the Servant? What is our mission as servants of the Servant? It is this: to vindicate God's honour. And how do we do that? We go to blind men and women, worshipping their empty idols, and we tell them that we once worshipped those same idols ourselves, and we discovered that they were empty, worthless – that they could do nothing for us – and we tell them about the living God, their Creator and Sustainer, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we urge them to turn from their idols to the living God. We deal with them as gently, as patiently, with the same determination, as our great Master, the Servant. And if we make that our mission,

and if we carry through that mission in obedience to the Servant, led by the Spirit of the Servant, then we cannot fail. God will be glorified His elect will be drawn. His honour will be vindicated.

2

THE SERVANT SONGS:

THE LORD'S SERVANT: HIS STORY

ISAIAH 49:1-9

We are looking at what are often called the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. In the second part of the book of Isaiah, that is to say, Isaiah 40–55, we have at least four passages which speak of a mysterious individual. In our previous study, we looked at the first Servant Song in Isaiah 42. And we were thinking especially about the Servant's *mission*. There in the first song, the Lord introduces this mysterious character, his Servant. We are told very little about him; all we know is that this one man has been chosen by God to fulfil a great mission. He must vindicate God. He must take the knowledge of the true God to all nations. He must deliver men and women everywhere from their blindness. He must turn them from their idolatry.

We are told a little about his character: his faithfulness, his patience, his gentleness, his courage. But we are told almost nothing about his life and work. Who is he? Where does he come from? How does he achieve his goals? *How* does he defeat the idols and set men free? These questions are not answered at all in the first Song. The picture is very misty. You are peering through a haze, trying to make out the figure who is at the centre of the stor .

But then as you move on to the second Song, the picture begins to come a little more into focus. And as you come to the third Song, you begin to see more detail again. And when you come to the fourth, it is as if all the mists vanish away, and at last you can see the figure of the Servant in all his majesty and glory. There is a progression through the Songs. With each of them, we focus in a little more clearly, until finally we see the one unmistakeable face of the Servant, and we find we are gazing on the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now you see how chapter 49 verse 1 picks up the thought of the first Servant Song. Back in chapter 42 verse 1 we saw there that the Servant's mission is to bring *justice* to the nations, to men and women everywhere, especially to the Gentiles. Again in chapter 42 verse 2 even the distant islands are listening to his Torah, his word.

That is one of the great emphases of these chapters. The destiny of the Servant is *global* in its scope. His mission is to all the world. His work embraces all nations.

It is perhaps hard for us to realise what an extraordinary and bold thing this was for Isaiah to predict; bold to the point of seeming utterly absurd.

Think of the global scene in Isaiah's day. In all the nations of the world, where can the knowledge of God be found? In all the earth, where is there that people know and worship the true God? There is that tiny strip of land, a few hundred square miles around Jerusalem. And that is all there is. In that land, the land of Judah, there is a remnant of people who worship the true God and refuse to bow to idols. But the rest of the earth? Every continent, every island is given over to darkness, to ignorance, to the worship of the little statues that men have made for themselves.

What a tiny outpost of truth! What a tiny light you have got glimmering in otherwise total darkness. The empire of the idols stretches from pole to pole, from east to west. It includes all the great powers of the world. Assyria has already swallowed up the northern kingdom of Israel, and it is threatening Judah in the south. The shadow of Babylon is growing. Egypt is waiting her turn. And in all these kingdoms, not a glimmering of truth or light; there is no knowledge of the true God, no fear of the Lord Jehovah.

And remember, for that handful of godly men and women who are left in the land of Judah, for most of them there is no thought that things could ever be different. It is something they can't imagine, that these empires could ever be rescued from the blindness. You remember how Jonah reacted when first the command came for him to go to Nineveh. The question for God's people in Isaiah's day was not, "How can we conquer the nations for Jehovah? How can we teach the Gentiles the fear of the Lord?" It was, "How long can we survive? How long will it be

before the nations blot us out and the last light of truth goes out?” They’re a tiny, beleaguered company, fighting for survival.

And it is in that situation that the Lord Jehovah declares, “Behold my servant. He will bring justice to the nations. The islands will put their hope in his law.” These are extraordinary words. The Gentiles will listen to the Servant as he pronounces his verdict. The idolaters will turn from their idols to listen to the Torah of Jehovah’s messenger.

What gigantic faith, God gave to the prophet Isaiah! To believe that one day, one Man would defeat the darkness and his word, his message, would reach to all nations!

There have been times in history when the cause of God has seemed so reduced, when we have felt that we are a beleaguered minority, with no option but to retreat. Well, that is a great challenge to faith. But none of us has ever stood where Isaiah stood, have we? To see the cause of God constricted as it was in his day, and still to believe that one day, the Servant of God would break through all the barriers of global idolatry and take the Word of God to the nations of the world. Yet that was Isaiah’s expectation as we saw it in the first Song

THE UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE OF THE SERVANT’S MESSAGE

Now in chapter 49 verse 1, we hear the Servant as he calls all the nations to listen to him. “Listen to me you islands. Hear this you distant nations!” The Servant calls all men everywhere to listen to him. He is a preacher, a proclaimer.

He has a message to declare and he knows he has the authority of God to declare it. He is sure that his message is relevant to people everywhere, to people of every land and people of every century. The words of the Servant will reach the hearts of men and women in every land, from every culture. Sophisticated people living in the great urban centres; people living in primitive societies in the rainforest; men and women from every language group, educated or uneducated will hear the voice of the Servant and will be brought to their knees by what they hear.

Isaiah prophesied it. And history tells us that it is true. The words of Jesus Christ have this extraordinary, universal power. He speaks in every language, across every cultural divide, to the hearts of men and women. There is no other figure in history whose words have the same universal power. Supposing I were to take a volume of Plato's "Dialogues" and translate them into the dialect of some tribe in Ecuador and go to that tribe and read them the words of the greatest philosopher of ancient Greece; what would it mean to them? Nothing at all! Supposing I were to take and read to them "Das Kapital" or J S Mill on Liberty? These books, which have had such a huge impact in some parts of the world, would be meaningless to the people in Ecuador. They are just too far removed from the people's experience. But I could go to the most primitive tribe on earth, the most barbaric and brutal people alive, and I could tell them about Jesus; about a man who lived in a far off country, two thousand years in the past and I could tell them the words of Jesus and they would understand. "Come unto

me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” “I am the way and the truth and the life; no-one comes to the Father but by me”. And I could take those same words to the most brilliant students in the greatest universities of the world and they would confess that no other men ever spoke like this man Jesus. He has the key to every heart.

Every true gospel congregation is a testimony to the truth of this verse. I was so moved a little while back looking out over my own congregation and noticing two people sitting side by side. One was a young man from one of the hardest estates in the town, a filthy slum where the police do not dare to go. I suppose he would be about fourteen years old, his father in and out of prison, he himself almost illiterate. What would Plato or Marx or J S Mill or Shakespeare have to say to him? But there he is sitting listening to the words of Jesus Christ. He has been listening to them since he was a three year old child in our Sunday-school. I do not think he is a Christian yet, but he comes back again and again, because he can not escape the voice of Jesus Christ. And sitting beside him there is a man in his sixties. He is a scientist, a quantum physicist with an international reputation. He heads up an interdisciplinary research team at Manchester University. For much of his life he was an agnostic. And now he sits drinking in the words of Jesus with the simplicity of a child. The Servant of the Lord has a commission to speak to men and women of every sort, from every kindred, tribe, tongue and nation, men and women from every background and every culture.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SERVANT'S MESSAGE

Now that gives us great confidence in our preaching to the men and women of our generation. We can go to the people around us with all their complex problems and struggles and fears; each with their own unique character, each with their own sin-damaged personality. We go to people in all the tangle of their circumstances, people who have been conditioned and brainwashed by the society they have grown up in; people with all their cultural prejudices; people whose whole lives have been devoted to one idol or another; people with the most deep-rooted sins of habit and character. And we believe that the words of Jesus Christ, the message of the Servant are addressed to every one of those people. "Listen to me," he says, "Listen to me!" There is that tremendous note of authority in his voice – he knows he has been sent by God to these people – and the echo of that authority must be heard in our voices when we speak in the name of Jesus Christ. It does not matter who we are speaking to; we do not have to apologise for our message; why should we be embarrassed or diffident? We can say to the most brutal wretch on earth, or to the most sophisticated intellectual in the world, "I come to you in the name of Jesus Christ, God's Servant. You are not obliged to listen to me, but you must and you will listen to him. Listen to him now or listen to him on the Day of Judgement". Christ commands, Christ demands to be heard by all men everywhere: "Listen to me you islands; hear this you distant nations".

So the Servant has a message to deliver and he calls all men to listen to him. But why should they listen? What qualifies him to speak with this total authority? That is

what we are going to look at in the remainder of our time in this session. We are going to look at the record of the Servant's life as we have it here. And we are going to see how that qualifies him for the mission to which he is called.

THE LIFE OF THE SERVANT

In verses 1–4, the Servant, speaking through the mouth of his prophet, outlines for us the story of his life. He tells us how he came to his present position, how he was qualified to bring us this message. I have six subheadings drawn from these verses.

THE SERVANT WAS CALLED

The Servant tells us, first of all, that he was *called*. “Before I was born, the Lord called me...” Literally, “from the womb, the Lord called me”. The Servant looks back; he looks back through his adulthood, through his teenage years, through his adolescence, his childhood, his infancy; and he cannot remember a time when he was not conscious of being special, of being chosen by God. Before he was born, when he was in his mother's womb, he had already been called by God to be his Servant. There was never a time when he was not conscious of the voice of God speaking to him, setting him apart from all other men. Even from his mother's womb, he knew the purpose, the meaning of his life. “I am the Lord's Servant. He has called me. I live to serve him. I exist for him: to do his will, to honour him, to obey him; he has chosen me”.

THE SERVANT WAS NAMED

The Servant tells us, secondly, that he was *named*. “Before I was born, the Lord called me; *from my birth he has made mention of my name*”. The servant commands us to listen to him. But now he tells us that from the moment of his birth, he has been listening to God. The Servant says, “Even as a baby, I lived in communion with God. I was conscious of God speaking to me, addressing me by name. I cannot remember a time when I was not living in intimate fellowship with God, listening to his voice, addressing me personally.”

You can think of a newborn baby lying in its mother’s arms. Already that baby knows its mother’s voice and she is just saying his name over and over. Well, the servant says, “I know the voice of my God; I cannot remember a time when I was not listening to him, learning from him; I cannot remember a time when I was not conscious of his love. From my birth, he has been speaking my name, and I have been listening.”

In Bible times, a name was much more than a convenient label. Your name is your identity, it is a declaration of who you are, of what your role in life is. From the time of his birth, the Servant found his whole identity in listening to the voice of God, in his relationship with the God who named him.

THE SERVANT WAS PREPARED

Thirdly, the Servant tells us that he was *prepared*. “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow

of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow.” From the moment the Servant’s life began, the Lord was preparing him. He was going to be the Lord’s weapon: a sword in the Lord’s hand, an arrow shot by the Lord; and that meant that he must be prepared; however long it takes, the Lord is going to prepare him, so carefully, so relentlessly.

The Servant did not become a preacher overnight. “He made my mouth like a *sharpened* sword...” Do you see the picture? When the time does come for the Servant to speak, his mouth will be like a sword; his words will cut through to people’s hearts, irresistibly. But the reason why his mouth has such extraordinary power is that it has been prepared; the sword has been sharpened with such care.

And it is not just as a *preacher* and *teacher* that the servant has been prepared. It is as a *man*. “He made *me* into a polished arrow”. The servant himself is compared to a weapon, an arrow. The Lord can send him into any situation and wherever he goes, people will be pierced to the heart by this man, by the impact of all he is as well as all he says. But again, that is the result of such careful preparation. The Lord has polished this arrow.

Before a warrior goes into battle, he prepares the sword he is going to use. He takes his whetstone and begins to sharpen the edge of the blade. Hour after hour he is whetting that edge until the moment comes when he says, “It is ready!” And in the same way he prepares his arrows. He wants to make sure that the arrow will fly absolutely straight. So he polishes the shaft until it is absolutely smooth; at last he can say, “It is ready, it is prepared!”

And the servant says, “It was like that for me. The Lord has chosen me to fight his great battle against the idolatry

of the world. I have to be his sword, his arrow. But first there had to be the years of long, patient preparation, when he was sharpening me, polishing me, preparing me to preach his message.”

THE SERVANT WAS HIDDEN

And then, fourthly, the Servant tells us that he was *hidden*. Verse 2: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he *hid* me; he made me into a polished arrow, and *concealed* me in his quiver”.

Here is the Servant whom God has chosen before birth, who has lived in constant fellowship with God, whom God is preparing to be his weapon. But nobody knows about him. He remains hidden, concealed from sight. He lives in obscurity until the moment comes for him to begin the great work for which he is being prepared.

And the Servant accepted that. He was willing to be a nobody, hidden from sight, simply waiting for the day when the Lord would send him out on his mission.

THE SERVANT WAS FRUSTRATED

Fifthly, the Servant tells us, he was *frustrated*. Verse 3: “He – the Lord – said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour,’ But I said, ‘I have laboured for nothing...’” The Servant knew that he had been chosen by God and prepared to do a great work. The Lord had said to him, “You are my servant, my Israel...” The nation of Israel was supposed to be God’s servant, to do God’s work in the world. But they had failed; they had

fallen into worldliness, and had adopted the idols of the world. So now this one man has to take on himself the destiny of the whole nation. Those who are truly God's people have been reduced to this one man. He is the only truly faithful Israelite. He is the only one who has truly kept the covenant. He is the true Israel. So the Lord says to his Servant, "You are my Israel"; you are the one who must do the work of Israel. You are the one through whom my purposes must be fulfilled. You are the one through whom I must display my splendour. The Servant was told that he would accomplish great and wonderful things, and that God's glory would be displayed to the world through him.

But there came a point in the life of the Servant when it did not seem like that. "I said, 'I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing...'" At last the day has come. The Servant, the one whom the Lord has chosen and prepared, the obedient servant who has waited so patiently in obscurity, the sword in the Lord's hand, the arrow fired from the Lord's bow – what does he find? Disappointment. Failure. Frustration. It seems that all his work has come to nothing. It all ends in failure and defeat. I have worked for nothing!

What an extraordinary story the Servant is telling us. I was chosen from my mother's womb; I was taught by the Lord's voice from my birth; I was sharpened, polished for the work I had to do; I was kept hidden until the great moment, God's secret weapon; I was promised that my work would bring God glory in all the world. He told me that I would be his Israel, bringing blessing to the nations. And at last the moment came, the battle began; and where did that battle end? It ended in defeat and failure and

frustration. How mysterious, how strange was God's plan for his Servant.

THE SERVANT BELIEVED

And then sixthly, the Servant tells us that he *believed*. He *trusted*. Yes, he met with what seemed to be failure and defeat. But in the hour of his defeat, he believed.. He was confident that the agonising failure would not be the end of the story. Verse 4: "I said, 'I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing; yet *what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God*.'" My work will not be in vain. All that God has promised me will come to me. It is due to me. It is a debt that God must and will pay. My work may seem to have ended with nothing gained; but it is not true; my reward is with my God. All I have longed for and worked for will come to pass. I wanted to be the Lord's Servant. I wanted to display his splendour to the world. I wanted to bring justice to the nations and vindicate his honour. That is the reward I longed for. And I believe it. It will come to pass. My reward is with my God.

The Servant is a *believer*. And his faith is tested to the utmost extremity. After his life of obedient service, an obedience that begins from the womb, he is brought to a point of utter frustration and defeat, where he is tempted to believe that it has all been for nothing. And that is the point at which faith meets its ultimate challenge. The Servant's faith is tested to the uttermost, and it does not fail. The Servant refuses to despair. "What is due me is in the Lord's hand. And I trust him".

So there you have the Servant of the Lord – the one who speaks to us – the one who says, ‘Listen to me’. This is the record of his life: chosen from the womb, listening always to the voice of his God, prepared to be the Lord’s weapon, hidden until the appointed moment, frustrated, defeated, tempted to despair, and yet clinging on in faith, believing that one day his mission will be completed and that the name of the Lord will be glorified in him

THE IDENTITY OF THE SERVANT

Now, can we recognise this Servant? Do we know his name? Surely there is only one candidate. And his name is Jesus. This is the Lord Jesus Christ speaking to us by his Spirit through the mouth of his prophet. We have been reading the life of the Lord Jesus as told by himself!

Set apart from all other men, he knew, even in the womb, he was the chosen one of God. The angel who came to Mary told her, “The Holy Spirit will overshadow you; the Holy One who will be born of you will be called the Son of God”. Set apart from all other men – perfectly holy, sinless – this child, even from the womb, knew he was the Servant. There was never a time when he was not listening to the voice of God his Father, loving the Father with all his heart, listening, learning, obeying. Do you remember the glimpse we have of him as a child of twelve – when he is lost in Jerusalem – and Joseph and Mary come looking for him? Where do they find him? He is in the temple, sitting, studying the Scriptures, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, asking them questions. That is his great joy – to hear his Father’s voice – and he knows the Father

is speaking to him through the pages of Scripture. Every word of Scripture he knows is the Father speaking to him, and he is listening to the Father's voice. He says to Mary, "Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?" You see, he has this consciousness of fellowship with God, this unbroken communion with the Father. That is why he can be so calm. Any other child lost in the great city for three days would surely be panicking; but no, Jesus has the calm, the peace, that comes from knowing the presence of his Father. He is in his own Father's house. As a baby, as a toddler, as a child, as a teenager, he is conscious of God; he loves his God with all the strength of his young heart; he is already the Servant, obeying the will of the Father in everything.

And he is being prepared. He is the sinless one – perfect in his humanity. And yet, he needs long years of preparation. As a child in Nazareth he is being prepared. As he lives in a peasant home with a human family, he is being prepared. As he learns in the village school, he is being prepared. As he wanders in the hills of Galilee, admiring the lilies of the field watching the birds of the air, he is being prepared. As he works alongside Joseph in the carpenter's shop, learning to use saw and hammer and plane, he is being prepared. As he prays, as he studies the Scriptures, as he sings the psalms in the synagogue, he is being prepared. He is being polished, he is being sharpened. The hard labour of that carpenter's shop is training his body for the rigours of the work he is going to do. The school and the synagogue are training his mind for the ministry of teaching and preaching and debating. The long hours spent in private meditation and secret prayer

are preparing his heart for the great public ministry that awaits him. Living with his family – having to be patient and wise and gracious with his brothers – is preparing him for the work he is going to do pastoring his disciples. When Joseph dies and he has to carry all the weight of the family on his young shoulders, he is being prepared for the day when he will carry the griefs and minister to the sorrows of the multitudes.

Those hidden years in the carpenter's shop, those years of manual labour, are not wasted years. They are not years when he is letting time go by, while waiting for his real work to begin. For him, at that time, that *is* his real work. Obedience in every little day by day duty – in the home, in the carpenter's shop – it is all preparing him for the great act of obedience he will one day perform. Glorifying God by the way he crafts a chair is a necessary preparation for the way he will glorify God as a preacher.

He is being prepared. And he is preparing himself. He knows that one day he must be ready for the great work and he knows that it is by his life of daily listening, daily obedience, *now* during those years of boyhood and early manhood, that he prepares himself for the great work that lies ahead.

And all through these years the Lord Jesus is hidden. The world did not see the Son of God during those thirty years when he was preparing himself in that home, in that carpenter's shop. The world did not know that the Servant of the Lord was in their midst. They did not see that life of perfect obedience that he lived at the carpenter's bench. It was all hidden, concealed till the day when Jesus stepped forward to be baptised, being about thirty years of age.

At last the moment had come. At last the hidden servant of God was ready for the work to which he had been called.

The story of that work is told us in the gospels. And what a wonderful story it is: the preaching, the teaching, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead. Wonderful things happened in those years as Jesus the Servant of the Lord laboured with his heart and soul and mind and strength at the work the Father had given him to do.

Crowds thronged around him. Thousands sang his praises. Multitudes of people testified to his power and blessed God. How wonderful it all seemed.

Yet three years on, what was the fruit of that marvellous ministry? Where is the Servant now? He is being dragged through the streets of Jerusalem, soaked in blood, a broken, shattered figure of a man. The crowds who were singing his praises six months earlier are screaming for his blood. They are spitting at him and they are cursing him. His disciples, yes, even his closest friends, have deserted him. There is not one man in all the world who is willing to stand with him when he is tried.

How extraordinary! Chosen in the womb, prepared for thirty years, at last brought out to do the Lord's work – and this is where it ends. Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, abandoned, defeated. His work seems to have ended in utter failure. Do you understand why the Servant would cry, "I have laboured to no purpose, I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing?" Do you understand the temptation then to despair, to accuse God of having broken his promises?

And yet... and yet. Look at the other half of the Servant's cry. Defeated, frustrated, humiliated, Jesus the Servant could still cry, "Yet, my reward is with my God". He knew that the cross would not be the end. He knew that triumph would lie ahead. He knew that somehow beyond the horrors of the cross he would yet see the reward promised to him by his Father. He would yet speak God's word to the nations and call them to obedience. He would yet see his Father glorified And so our Lord Jesus remained obedient to the end, confident in his Father's wisdom, trusting in his Father's love, crying out in the darkness, "My God! My God!"

And so the moment of utter catastrophe and defeat becomes the moment when faith wins its supreme victory. Jesus has been stripped of everything: his family, his friends, his ministry, his reputation; even the sense of God's presence has been taken from him. He is left in utter darkness with all created things stripped away; and in the darkness he is still crying out, "My God, my God, I do not understand, but I trust you still." He is the true Israel, the ultimate believer, wrestling alone with God through the darkest night. God comes against him as an enemy, and Jesus clings to him and cries out, "I will not have you as my enemy. I will not let you go until you bless me".

From his mother's womb, to the cry of desolation at Calvary, the life of the Lord Jesus is a life of faith. And that is what qualifies him to preach repentance and faith to the nations.

THE SERVANT'S REWARD: UNIVERSAL DOMINION

But now, from verse 5 onwards, the perspective has changed. Up until now, the Servant has been recounting his past experience. But now he is declaring his present authority and his expectation for the future. He shares with us what he is expecting the Lord to do now, for him and through him, what his Father has promised him he will do. Verse 5: “And now, the LORD says; verse 6, he says...; verse 7, ... this is what the LORD says...; verse 8, ... this is what the LORD says. What has God promised to his obedient Servant, to the Servant who remained obedient to death, who remained faithful even when it seemed that all his labour was for nothing? He has promised him *universal dominion*.

LORD OF ISRAEL

First, he must bring Jacob back to the Lord, he must gather Israel, his kinsmen, the physical children of Abraham. That is verse 5. The Lord Jesus has taken the place of Jacob. He has wrestled with God in the darkness and he has overcome. He has become the true Israel, the man who has prevailed with God and whose prayers for his family will always be effective. So now he gathers his fallen brothers, his fellow Israelites. On that dreadful day when Jesus dies, how many Israelites are there? How great is the faithful remnant? Well, we have answered the question already. One man. One man who is worthy to bear the name. But what is the first action of Jesus after the resurrection? It is to regather the eleven, and

then to add to them a twelfth, to be the nucleus of the restored nation, the Israel of God. The twelve become a hundred and twenty. And then at Pentecost, three thousand more are gathered – Jewish people dwelling among every nation under heaven. And so the word of the gospel grows and grows among Jewish people, as Jesus the Servant speaks to the hearts of countless Jewish men and women. When Paul arrives in Jerusalem (Acts 21), the Jerusalem brethren are able to say with joy, “You see brother, how many *myriads* of Jews have believed”. Never underestimate the astonishing harvest that was gathered among Jewish folk in that first generation. How could it be otherwise when it was promised to the Servant that he would bring Jacob back to the Lord? And all down through history there has been a remnant of Jewish men and women who have been drawn by the voice of Jesus.

And this is surely what we must expect. How can any believer be a pessimist about gospel work among Jews while we have such passages as this in our Bibles? It is part of the reward promised to the Lord Jesus, that he should bring Jacob back to God, and gather Israel to himself. This is part of the honour due to Jesus as the reward of his obedience: “he formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, to gather Israel – *for I am honoured* in the eyes of the Lord.” Surely we take these verses and we turn them into prayer. “Sovereign Lord, you have promised your Servant that he will bring Jacob and gather Israel – it is the reward you have promised him, it is the honour that is due to

him. Lord, do not disappoint your Servant who trusted you. Send him to his brothers. Make the words of his mouth a sharpened sword to pierce their hearts. Lord, save Israel for the sake of Jesus.” That is our prayer and our expectation.

LORD OF THE NATIONS

But that is not all, is it? The Father has said more. Verse 6, the LORD says to the Servant, “It is not enough for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” It isn’t sufficient honour for Jesus the Servant that he should restore Israel. The light of his glory must blaze before all nations. He must carry the Lord’s salvation to the ends of the earth. It is promised to him. It is the reward that is due to him.

Again I say, no believing Christian can be a pessimist about the future of Christ’s cause on earth. The Lord has promised – verse 7 – that kings, rulers, princes will rise in honour of Jesus the Servant and fall worshipping at his feet. We expect to see the leaders of nations paying honour to the one who was despised and abhorred by his own nation. We expect to see visible triumphs for Jesus Christ in all the world.

Now you can say to me, “Well, what does that mean precisely, exactly, in statistical terms? Are you saying that 50% of the world’s population must be saved? Are you saying that a day will come when every world leader will publicly acknowledge Christ?” And my answer to all such

questions is, “I have no idea. The Bible never talks in those terms”. What I do know is this: this passage stirs huge hopes and expectations within me. It tells me that Christ’s reward is to be as great as Christ’s obedience. It tells me that the Father loves to honour the Son. It tells me that the Servant’s mission to the nations will not peter out in defeat – rather it will end in glorious triumph.

There are times when God’s people in this world become deeply discouraged. We see the forces of Islam, and secularism, and the New Age Movement, and how they seem to sweep everything before them. We see the power of the godless media to manipulate minds and to spread the propaganda of Satan. And we carry on with our work, but we carry on a mood of deep despondency and cynicism, expecting little, resigned to failure, feeling – even if we never say it – that our God has betrayed us. Well, at those times, we need to come back to this passage, and to hear again the words of the Servant. He, too, was tempted to despair, to say, “My work is in vain and for nothing.” He has stood where we stand. And then we need to hear again the words of the Father: “I will make you a light for the Gentiles, you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” The last word will not be with the Marxists, or the humanists, or the New Age gurus, or with Antichrist, or with Satan. The last word of history will be with Jesus, the Servant of the Lord!

3

THE SERVANT SONGS:

THE LORD'S SERVANT: HIS OBEDIENCE

ISAIAH 50:4-11

We are looking at the third of Isaiah's "Servant Songs": Isaiah 50 verses 4–11. Now let me sum up what we have learned so far about the Servant from the first two songs. Isaiah tells us that the Servant is God's chosen one. Out of the whole human race, he is the one man who pleases God in every way. From his birth he will live a life of obedience to God. He will be God's weapon, God's instrument to do God's work here on earth. He will go through a long period of preparation when God will be preparing him for his work. And during that time of preparation he will be hidden; he will grow up unknown, unrecognised. Nobody will know that the Lord's Servant is living among them. But then, at last, the time of preparation will be over, and the Servant will begin his great work. He will be a Jew – he

is the one who fulfils the destiny of Israel – and his work will be to preach to the Jewish nation and bring them back to God. But the Servant's work will end in what seems like frustration and utter failure. It will seem that he has been defeated. He will be despised and abhorred by his own nation. The Servant will say, "I have spent my life, I have used my strength in vain".

But that will not be the end. In the midst of that utter disaster, the Servant will remain faithful, believing that God's word will not fail. And God will vindicate his Servant. Defeat will turn into triumph. Yes – everything will seem to have been lost. But that disaster will lead to a much greater work. From that moment, the Servant's message will go out not only to Israel, but to the whole world. The Servant will be a Saviour, a deliverer for men and women everywhere. He will bring light to the Gentiles; he will bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. Men and women everywhere will be rescued from their idolatry. People who have spent their lives worshipping created things will be set free to worship the true and living God, their Creator. And they will honour the Servant who has set them free. Kings will bow down in honour of the despised Servant. God's splendour, God's glory is going to be displayed to all the world.

Now before we move on, I just want you to pause and think. What an extraordinary story for Isaiah to tell! He is telling the story of how the great Rescuer will come – the man who will transform the world. If Isaiah had just been making things up by himself, what sort of figure would he have invented? When people talk about great leaders, what sort of characters do they look for? They think

of statesmen, warriors, men with huge personal ambition and charisma. But when Isaiah looks forward it is not that sort of figure he sees. He sees a man who is ready to be a Servant, a slave, a man who has no goals, no ambitions, no programme of his own – a man who spends his whole life, listening, obeying, serving.

If Isaiah had just been daydreaming, I think he would have imagined the world being conquered by a great hero, a King Arthur, a Hercules, an Alexander, winning victories, overthrowing tyrants, marching from victory to victory. But that was not Isaiah's dream. Isaiah, writing at a time when Israel seemed to be an irrelevant blot on the map, looked forward and said, "One day, a Jew, growing up unknown, unrecognised, will live a life of perfect obedience to God. He will become a preacher; he will preach God's word to his fellow-Jews. He will be despised and hated by his own people. His work will end in failure and frustration. And then – and only then – he will triumph and his message will go to all nations, and he will become the light of the world. He will be obeyed, honoured, adored in every country of the world, through all the ages to come.

We are familiar with these passages. And because of that we can fail to see just how extraordinary – how completely bizarre – Isaiah's words must have seemed. They go against all human expectations. What he is predicting goes against all human logic.

And yet 800 years later, all that Isaiah had predicted came to pass. We do not have any problem recognising who Isaiah was speaking about, do we? We have said it before: there is only one candidate. A Jewish carpenter becomes a preacher. He is rejected by his own people. His work ends

in humiliation and failure. He is nailed to a cross of wood and left to die. And three days later, his disciples say, “He is alive. We have met him. We have seen him. We have touched him. God has raised him from the dead.”

Within thirty years, men and women all over the Roman Empire – savage tribes—people in the hills of Turkey, elegant aristocrats in Rome – are turning from their idols and praying to that Jewish carpenter. Two thousand years later, in every country of the world, there are men and women who say that he has rescued them from darkness and despair. Last Lord’s Day thousands of men and women and children, all across this nation met to sing his praises; to listen to his words, to express their love for *Jesus of Nazareth*, the Servant of the Lord, the Light of the Gentiles, the Salvation of the World. How could Isaiah have known it all? Who would ever have predicted such a story?

You know, there may be times when some of you who are gospel ministers, may be tempted to doubt the inspiration of this book. Is it *really* God’s book? Did God *really* inspire men to write the words of this book? There are times when those doubts flood my mind too. And then so often I turn back to these passages – and I shake my head in wonder, and know that no human wisdom could have written these Songs, no political analyst could have predicted the career of this Servant. Isaiah wrote as he was moved by the Holy Spirit.

If we only had the first two Servant Songs, it would be enough – enough to show us that Jesus really is the promised Saviour and Messiah, enough to show us that the Bible really is the Word of God. But of course, we

do have more. Because as we have said, with each of the Servant Songs, we are given more detail, a clearer picture of the Lord's Servant. The great themes are the same, but the focus is sharper.

So let us move on to this third Servant Song. You will see it is divided into three sections. Firstly, in verses 4 to 6, the Servant again tells us the story of his life here on earth. And then in verses 7 to 9, he again declares his faith that God will vindicate him. And then in verses 10 and 11, we are warned how desperately important it is that we should listen to the word of the Servant. So let us look firstly at the way the Servant describes his own life and work in verses 4 to 6. We are going to spend virtually all our time on these verses, and then just glance briefly at the other two sections.

THE SERVANT'S LIFE

Now you will find that so much of what he says in verses 4–6 echoes what we have already seen in the earlier passages. But now we are seeing far more clearly just what the servant must go through – and especially how he will suffer.

THE SERVANT SPEAKS

I want us to see four things about the Servant in these three verses. The first is this. *The servant speaks*. Verse 4: “The Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.” Here we see the Servant ministering, caring, speaking to weary, hurting, helpless

people, giving them new strength, new hope, sustaining them. His ministry is a compassionate ministry. In the first of these studies, we stressed that the great motivation for the Servant's ministry is the glory of God. He wants to see God's honour vindicated. But to say that is not to say that there is no room in his heart for human compassion. We have all known preachers who have discovered for the first time the doctrine of God's sovereignty, God's glory. Before they discovered this, they had thought that their job was to make the message as attractive and pleasing to human beings as they possibly could. That is changed now. They know that their first responsibility must be to uphold God's honour in their preaching. But tragically they feel that the only way of doing that is to be as aggressive, as brutal in their presentation of the truth as they can be. Every sermon becomes an indictment, an attack on the hearers. And sometimes there is very little grace, very little tenderness in their preaching

But that is not what we have here is it? The Servant never forgets that among his hearers are weary, hurting, aching people. He has compassion for them in their needs. And so there is a winsomeness, a tenderness in his ministry. His goal is not to demolish the weary – it is to sustain them.

And he knows how to do it. He “knows the word to sustain the weary.” The Servant knows men and women – he has a perfect knowledge of the human heart, human needs. He sees men and women in all their different needs – and he knows how to deal with them all. He knows what they need to hear.

One of the most vital qualifications for the preacher must be that he knows people – how they think, how they feel, the things they struggle with. He must know the fears and the doubts and the struggles of his hearers. Sadly, I would have to say that that is one of the greatest weaknesses of reformed preaching. There has been a tremendous emphasis on books and study, getting to understand the doctrines. But there has been far less emphasis on the need to study the heart – the preacher’s own heart, the hearts of his hearers. There has been far less emphasis on *knowing people*. Many preachers spend so many hours in the study, and then so many hours in organised church activities, that they have no time simply to be with people, believers, unbelievers, listening, learning how people think, how they react, where they are at. And the result is that their preaching simply does not hit the mark. They answer questions that no-one is asking. They deal with issues that nobody is wrestling with. And meantime, they never apply the word to the real situations, the real conflicts, the real heartaches that people are struggling with.

By contrast, I want you to think about the Lord Jesus, the perfect Servant, the perfect Preacher. Some time sit down and read your way through the gospels and see there the time the Lord Jesus gives to individuals – and the way he speaks to each of those individuals individually. He *knows* them. He knows how different they are and what different needs they have! There is a Pharisee called Nicodemus – he is an intellectual, a man used to exercising authority – he comes to Jesus by night secretly. He is a religious leader, a theological

expert – but there is something missing – he knows that somehow all his respectable religion does not satisfy him – it is not real. That is surely the reason he takes this humiliating step – he seeks out this untrained rabbi – this carpenter’s son from Nazareth. He knows that Jesus has something he has never seen anywhere else. And the Lord Jesus knows exactly what is going on in that man’s heart – he puts his finger on that man’s real problem. He says, “You know your real problem is this – you have never been born again. You do not know the supernatural power of the Spirit within.” Jesus knows the word that man needs to hear.

And then you turn over to the very next chapter, John chapter 4 – and what do you find? You find Jesus is talking to a woman in Samaria. The contrast is so complete. Nicodemus – a man, probably an elderly man. But now Jesus is speaking to a young woman, attractive, fashionable. A Jewish man; a foreign woman. A highly moral man; an utterly immoral woman. She has been through five marriages and now is living with someone else’s husband. You could not have a greater contrast, could you, than that man, that woman? But do you know the one thing they have in common. It is this – they are both weary. He is weary of his empty religion. She is weary of her sick, sordid life. And Jesus knows – he knows how weary she is, how thirsty, how empty she is inside. And he says to her, “I can give you the water of everlasting life, springing up inside you – you need never be thirsty again!” He knows exactly what that wretched woman needed to hear. Go through the gospels and you will find Jesus speaking to a blind

beggar by the roadside. You will find him talking to a tax collector – the richest man in the town. You will see him speaking to lawyers and to criminals, to respectable mothers and to prostitutes. He knows them all. He knows their hearts. He knows their deepest longings, their aches, their fears, their sins. And he can speak to them all. We have said he has got the key to every heart. He knows exactly what each one of them needs to hear. He knows how to give them hope and peace, how to rescue them from the torment of conscience, how to take away their fears and their shame and their despair.

He could say, “Come unto me *all* you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me”. And every one who was willing to come and learn from him found that, yes, he had the answer that no-one else could give.

That is surely extraordinary! Jesus is a young man – thirty years old – single – never trained in psychology or counselling. And he speaks to young men and old men and single women and married women, and they all say, “No man ever spoke like this man.” The woman of Samaria said, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. He knew every nook and cranny of my heart. He knew the things about me that no-one else ever guessed at – the loneliness, the secret despair, the thirst in my soul, the weariness. And he spoke to me. And his words broke my heart and made me a new woman.”

So that is the first thing about the Servant – he speaks. He speaks with unique wisdom, with perfect insight. He is the supreme psychologist, the supreme counsellor, the supreme communicator.

THE SERVANT LISTENS

And then, the second thing, *he listens*. The servant listens to the Sovereign Lord. As I say, it is extraordinary to think of Jesus, this young man, thirty years old, and to see his perfect wisdom in speaking to men and women of every age and class, in every need. Where has he learned this wisdom? He has learned it by listening. He has learned it by listening to his God and Father. Look again at verse 4. “The Sovereign Lord has given me an *instructed* tongue...” His tongue has been *instructed*. His wisdom has been given to him by the Sovereign Lord. He can speak to others only because he has spent his life listening to God.

What a lovely glimpse we have here of the secret life of the Lord Jesus – his intimate fellowship with God the Father. “He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.” Jesus the Servant wakes each morning and he is immediately aware of the presence of his Father. “God has woken me up. He has brought me through another night. He has given me another day. And now what has God to say to me today? What lessons will he teach me? What instructions will he give me?” This is all part of being a Servant. I have been woken up by my Master to begin my day’s work. But now before I begin the work, first I must listen – first I must learn. Every task I do today – I must do it in the way he wants me to do it. Every word I speak today, I must speak with wisdom he teaches me. So every day begins with waiting upon God, listening to God. Every morning the Servant has an appointment with his Lord.

Now again you can see this in the gospels. Jesus is in the town of Capernaum. And all through the evening,

people are crowding round the house where he is staying – they want him to heal the sick – they want him to drive out demons – they want him to help them in their needs. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” You see, every morning, there must be this appointment with God. Before he speaks to anyone else, he must speak with his Father. He must learn, he must listen, he must pray. He is listening, lovingly learning from God.

Now I should add that we are not talking only about a mystical communion in which knowledge, insight, wisdom is communicated directly to the heart of the Lord Jesus. Clearly there are times in the experience of the Lord Jesus when there is that direct supernatural communication. He is given information that he could not have learned naturally. He knows that the woman at the well has had five husbands. He knows that Peter will deny him three times before daybreak. Yes, he is listening as the Father whispers these things to his attentive ear. But chiefly the Lord Jesus listens to God in the same way we listen to God – by meditation upon the words of Scripture. As you read through the gospels you see how completely the Lord Jesus is soaked in the words of Old Testament Scripture, and you see that it is in those Scriptures he hears the voice of God. It is from those Scriptures that he knows what God’s will for him is, what his work is to be, how he is to react to the situations with which he is confronted. In the wilderness, when Satan says to him, “Cast yourself from the pinnacle of the temple,” he does not say, “My Father has just revealed to me that I must not do that”. He says,

“It is written... It is written... It is written.” Where does he learn his own destiny? It is from the Scriptures – even these Servant Song passages we are studying now. Again and again in the gospels, he says, “The Son of Man must go up to Jerusalem, must be handed over to the Gentiles, must suffer many things, must die and be raised from the dead the third day – why? – because it is written in the Scriptures.” Even when the voice of the Father spoke directly to him at his baptism, every word that he spoke was taken directly from the Old Testament. “You are my Son” – the Anointed One of Psalm 2. “... my beloved Son”, the true Isaac who must be bound to the altar and offered in sacrifice “... in whom my soul delights”, the Servant of whom Isaiah spoke. The way the Father spoke to the Lord Jesus here on earth was by taking the words of Scripture and interpreting them and applying them. The Lord Jesus is constantly taking the words of Scripture, meditating upon them – and in those words he is hearing the voice of the Father.

And so the Lord Jesus could say, “I do nothing on my own, but I speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me – I always do what pleases him”. “I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it; whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

That is why the Lord Jesus could speak to the hearts of men and women with such extraordinary power. His words were born out of his deep, daily communion with the Father, that morning by morning listening to the voice of God.

Now of all the verses from Isaiah's Servant Songs which we are studying together, this is perhaps the one I would most want to lay upon you who are ministers of the word of God. "He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught". If you are a true minister, a true pastor, then you are a busy man – because you will never be able to say, "I have done all that needs to be done". And it is so easy for our lives to become so busy that we have no time for this – for this daily, unhurried, listening to God, this morning by morning, waiting on him.

If the Lord Jesus, the sinless, and perfect Son of God, infinite in his deity and perfect in his humanity, if *he* needed the discipline of this daily listening to God, how can any preacher say, "I am too busy for that." Jesus the incarnate Word of God could not preach to others without first listening to the Father. Many of us mourn the lack of power in our pulpit preaching, the lack of effectiveness in our pastoral counselling, the lack of evident blessing on our evangelism. And we look for a thousand explanations and a thousand solutions. But for many of us the explanation, I am afraid, is so simple. We cannot speak to others because we are not listening to God. We have neglected the first thing. We have forgotten that we are Servants, and that the first duty of the Servant is to listen to his Master.

THE SERVANT OBEYS

Thirdly, *the Servant obeys*. Verse 5: "The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back." Again, what a graphic picture

we have here of the inner life of the Lord Jesus. From his infancy to the hour of his death, his life is a life of simple obedience. He is *listening* to the word of his Father – his ears are open – and he is *obeying* the word of his Father.

I wonder whether in all eternity, we will ever begin to understand what it cost the Lord Jesus to obey the word of the Father. I wonder if we shall ever begin to grasp the intensity of the temptation he experienced, to turn away from the Father's will.

We have just thought of the temptations in the wilderness. Do you see him there during those forty tormented days? Where has obedience to the Father led him? It has led him into hunger and thirst, into loneliness and fear. And now the voice of Satan is whispering in his ear, "It does not need to be like this. There is an easier way, if you will take it. I can give you the kingdoms of the world and all their glory without all this suffering." And you can hear the agonised cry from the Servant's lips – "No... no... it is written... it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only." Everything in his human nature is crying out to find an easier road; and yet, he knows, "It is written", and he cannot disobey that word. "My Father has said it. And I cannot disobey my Father."

Do you see the Lord Jesus again? He is in the shadows of a garden, and it is night-time, and he is lying on the ground, and he is shaking with fear. He is overwhelmed by horror, the nightmare thought of the cross. His mind is filled with a black agony. And he is praying, "Father, Father, please, please take this cup from me." And he is crying those words over and over again. And in the intensity of

his struggle the sweat pours from him like great drops of blood. And then you hear the words that break from his lips, “But not my will but your will be done.” Those words have cost him everything. But that is the obedience of the Servant. He could say, “I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back”. The servant obeys.

So often we slide into a way of thinking which says that the path of obedience should always be attractive and pleasant – that there should be no conflict no cost in doing the will of God. It was not so for Jesus the Servant. There will be times when God’s word will command you to do things, and you will say, “I would rather die than do that. To do that would tear me in half. I can’t do it.” And then you will do it, because you are a follower of Jesus the Servant.

THE SERVANT SUFFERS

Fourthly, *the Servant suffers*. What is involved for the Servant in obeying the voice of God? Where will obedience to the Father lead? Look at verse 6: “I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking or spitting.”

In the two earlier Servant Songs, we have just caught hints that the Servant is going to have to endure through pain and distress. In the first Song, we read that “he will not falter or be discouraged”. Well surely that suggests that he is going to face things that could discourage him and bring him down. In the second Song we saw him crying out that he had spent his strength in vain, laboured for nothing.

He is described there as the one who is despised and abhorred by his own people. But now the picture is coming into focus and at last we are allowed to see something of the pain the Servant will experience. There are three elements. There is *punishment*. “I gave my back to those who beat me.” This is not just a man being beaten up by attackers – this is a man being flogged, stretched out so that his back can be beaten. This is a man who is being treated as a criminal; he has been sentenced to be flogged.

Do you remember in our first study? We saw how God calls the nations into his courtroom and confronts them. And we saw how the Servant steps forward in that courtroom to speak up for God, to represent God’s cause, to show men and women their guilt. It was his task to bring *justice* to the nations. But now, instead of submitting to his verdict, instead of acknowledging that they are in the wrong, men have accused *him* and have found *him* guilty, and sentenced *him*. God’s faithful Servant, the great champion of justice, is judged by wicked men – and they condemn him – and now he must face the flogging. The body – the body with which he has served God in perfect obedience all his days – that body must now be beaten, torn apart by the whip. The servant must endure horrible punishment, the most brutal injustice.

There is punishment. And there is *torture*. “I offered my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard”. This has gone beyond punishment inflicted by a court of law. This is simply sadistic cruelty, inflicted by brutal men. They are standing around the Servant, and they have worked themselves up into a sadistic excitement. And now they are grabbing hold of his beard and pulling it out in great

chunks. He has been handed over to these men, and all restraints have been taken away, and they are finding delight in his pain.

There is punishment. There is torture. And there is *humiliation*. “I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting”. This is a man publicly humiliated, stripped of all dignity, laughed at. In that world, to spit on somebody was the ultimate sign of your contempt. We know the Lord’s estimation of the Servant: “My Servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight”. And now we know the world’s estimation of the Servant – he is a joke, he is an irrelevance, he is worthless.

Can you see the Servant? He is a convicted criminal: he has been flogged till his body is a mass of bleeding flesh he has been beaten up and tortured by a gang of brutal sadists, he has got spittle running down his face where they have spat at him. And people are standing all around him laughing and jeering.

And he accepts it. That is the crucial thing here. He accepts it willingly. “I *offered* my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. *I did not hide my face* from mocking and spitting”. No-one could have forced this upon the Servant. He has chosen this willingly. He has submitted to this injustice, to this brutality and humiliation. He has done so because he is the Servant and he knows that this is what his God requires of him. This is what obedience means. The Servant suffers – suffers unspeakable, unimaginable things. And he does not draw back.

There is no virtue in suffering for its own sake. There are religions and philosophies that teach that suffering itself is

good; it purifies you, it gives you merit. No – suffering in itself is evil and ugly. And yet, suffering accepted lovingly out of obedience to God is infinitely precious

What does Paul say in Philipians? “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”. He urges us to take Christ Jesus as our great role model – “Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God did not consider his equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a Servant. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself yet further and became *obedient unto death, even the death of a cross*” – the death of a convicted criminal, a death that was the ultimate torture, a death of naked shame and humiliation.

Tonight, before you sleep, I would urge you just to open your Bibles again and read the old, old story as it is told in one or another of the gospels. Read of that last dreadful night when he was dragged from one court to another, browbeaten, bullied, interrogated. Read how he was convicted by false witnesses who lied about him. Read how he was tortured by the guards who beat him around the head and punched him in the face. Read how they flogged him with a whip which tore the flesh off his bones. Read how they drove him through the streets to Calvary. Read how they stripped him naked and laughed as he writhed in agony and struggled for breath on a cross. And as you read, say to yourself again and again, “This is obedience. This is what it means to be the Servant.” And ask yourself, “Do I want *this* Jesus as my role model? Can I really say with Paul: ‘I want to know him, and the power of his resurrection – and the fellowship of his sufferings – *being made like him in his death*?’”

I have so many friends who are in the ministry. And we love to talk together. And so often our talk is about how hard and how painful our lives are in the ministry. And we talk about the injustices we have experienced in the ministry. Some of you men will have suffered appalling injustices, I know. And we talk about the pain that has been inflicted on us. And we talk about the times we have been humiliated and treated with contempt. And we tell one another how unfair it all is. And we ask “Why?”

But brethren, what did we expect, when we set out to follow Jesus Christ? What did we expect when we prayed, “Make me like the Lord Jesus?” Did we not know this chapter? This was the choice we made. Why complain now? Our greatest honour is that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

We want to speak as Christ spoke. Then we must listen as Christ listened. And we must obey as Christ obeyed. And I believe that somewhere, somehow, we will be called in some measure to suffer as Christ suffered. Paul uses the boldest language – he says that he fills up in his own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. That is what it means to be servants of the Servant.

THE SERVANT’S VINDICATION

We follow Christ in his path of listening and obeying and suffering. And we follow Christ to vindication and to glory. The Servant can see beyond the injustice, and the torture and the shame. Verse 7: “Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I shall not be disgraced. That is why I have set my face like flint to endure whatever may come –

because I know I will not be put to shame.” Oh yes, he will be humiliated now – but he will be vindicated one day. He will be condemned in the courts of men, but he will be honoured in a higher court. Verse 8: “He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other. Who is my accuser? Let him confront me. It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.”

When the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead, it was the beginning of his vindication. Men condemned him and killed him. But God raised him from the dead. It was God’s great declaration to all the world that this was his beloved Son. Men tortured him. The Father exalted him to enjoy all the pleasures at his right hand forever more. Men humiliated him. The Father has given him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. God is vindicating him today. Every time another man or woman or child is brought to the feet of Jesus and is compelled to say, “He is Lord”, the Servant is being vindicated. And one day, God will again call all the nations into his courtroom, and again the nations of the world will be confronted by the Servant of the Lord. Will they dare bring charges against him then? Will they dare accuse him and condemn him then? Will they mock him and spit upon him then – when Jesus sits as the righteous judge to bring the final verdict to the nations?

Some of you are pastors and have had your names dragged through the mud as the price for standing with

Jesus the Servant. Some of you have been slandered and lied about. Some of you have been made to feel utterly wretched. What does it matter, if on that day you are found standing with Jesus Christ in the hour of his triumph? Listen to Paul yet again: “If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.”

OBEYING THE SERVANT

The challenge of this passage is there in verse 10. “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his Servant?” Who is there who is willing to submit himself, herself, to the voice of the Lord Jesus as he submitted himself to the voice of his Father. Who is willing to follow him, if necessary, through the darkness of injustice and pain and humiliation? “Let him who walks in the darkness and has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

There are easier ways to walk. There are ways of avoiding the path of injustice and suffering and shame. There are ways of making sure that you will be popular and successful and applauded: say the things that the people of the world want you to say, entertain them in the way they want to be entertained, be the sort of man they want you to be.

Surely, we have all felt this temptation. The voice of the Servant calls us to a pathway of sacrifice and reproach and pain. And we have all asked ourselves, “Surely we can make things a bit easier? Why walk in darkness if you can light a fire for yourself?

“But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with blazing torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and

of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You shall lie down in torment” (verse 11).

There is a dark road. It is the road the Servant walked. And it leads to vindication and glory and everlasting joy. And there is another road, a road lit by the torches men make for themselves. And it leads to misery, to torment and everlasting regret.

It is a privilege to be followers of Jesus Christ, to be servants of the Servant! “I would rather walk in the dark with him, than walk alone in the light”. It is a privilege to be allowed to stand alongside Jesus Christ in the great courtroom of the world, bearing testimony to the living God and rebuking the world’s idolatry – even if the world condemns us with him. It is a privilege to look forward to that great day when we shall stand with Jesus Christ in a greater courtroom, and see him crowned with glory for ever and ever. May Jesus Christ, the Servant of the Lord, speak to our hearts, today, the word that sustains the weary.

4

THE SERVANT SONGS:

THE LORD'S SERVANT: HIS REWARD

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

Now let me begin by reminding you again of what we have seen so far in the first three Servant Songs. In these passages, Isaiah gives us a picture of a very mysterious figure. We are never told his name – Isaiah simply calls him “the Lord’s Servant”. And in each of the three passages we see something very strange. Each of these passages tells us that the Lord’s Servant is going to be the greatest, the most important figure in history. Men and women all across the world are going to submit to him and obey his law. He is going to be the great Liberator. He is going to set prisoners free. He is going to be the Saviour and Lord of the world. Each passage talks about the triumph, the victories, the power, the rule of the Servant. “Kings will see you and rise up. Princes will see and bow down.”

And yet each of these passages also tells us about the suffering of the Servant – that the Servant is going to be frustrated. He is going to be rejected and humiliated. You see it in sharper and sharper focus as you look at these three passages in turn. In the third Song, we had these words: “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting”. He has been sentenced to be flogged. He is a figure of fun and ridicule. He is being beaten and tortured. People hate the servant. They stand around him and spit on him and rip the beard out of his face.

That is the great puzzle that runs through these Servant passages. On the one side Isaiah is saying, “The Servant is going to be great. He is going to rule the world. God says to him, ‘In you I will display my splendour.’” And on the other side, Isaiah tells us, the Servant is going to be rejected, broken, humiliated, destroyed! That is the paradox – the enigma – the contradiction – that Isaiah brings to us; and it gets sharper as we go on from one passage to the next.

You can imagine the people who first read Isaiah’s prophecies, 800 years before the coming of the Lord Jesus, puzzling over these chapters. “It does not make sense,” they say. “Who is this servant? Is he a king – or is he a criminal? One moment Isaiah tells us he is the Lord’s chosen one; the next Isaiah says he is tortured to death. In one verse, Isaiah tells us he is going to be honoured and loved by men and women all across the world; the next, he is telling us the Servant is going to be utterly hated and rejected. What does he mean? How can both be true?”

And maybe it was not just Isaiah's readers who were bewildered. Maybe Isaiah himself struggled to understand how these things could all be true. Do you remember in 1 Peter chapter 1 we are told that the "prophets searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to understand just what the Holy Spirit was saying when he spoke about the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow". Maybe Isaiah himself spent many hours wrestling to understand what the Holy Spirit was showing him – the Servant's sufferings – the Servant's glories. It was all so contrary to human experience, human expectations.

Now with that in mind, let us move on to the fourth Servant Song. Now this fourth Song is much longer than the first three passages we looked at. And we are not going to be able to look at every verse in detail. So let me just give you an overview of this fourth Servant Song and show you how it is structured. I hope that that will be a help to you when you come to look further at the passage yourselves.

You will see that the passage falls into five sections – five stanzas. And in the NIV – which I am using – they are helpfully marked out for you. You see the paragraph divisions in the NIV. The first stanza runs from chapter 52 verse 13 to the end of chapter 52. And that first stanza serves as an introduction to the whole song. And that first paragraph shows us what a bewildering, baffling figure the Servant is. And I am going to give that first paragraph the heading, "*The Puzzle – or the Enigma – of the Servant*". And as I say, that first paragraph acts as an introduction to the whole song. In a sense the whole song is about the puzzle of the Servant – and how that puzzle can be explained.

The second stanza runs from chapter 53 verse 1 to chapter 53 verse 3. And its theme is the suffering of the Servant – how the Servant is despised and rejected. It describes the way he suffers. That is the problem that needs to be explained – why the Servant who is destined for glory should go through such sorrow. So our heading for that second stanza is: *“The Servant – what he suffered”*.

And then the third paragraph – verses 4–6 – begins to explain why the Servant had to suffer; what the purpose was behind his suffering. We begin to see what his suffering achieved. So our heading for the third paragraph is: *“The Servant – what he achieved”*.

And then in the fourth paragraph we see another aspect of the puzzle. In this paragraph we are looking at the injustice the Servant suffered. That is verses 7–9. There were so many things the Servant was deprived of – things he forfeited. And it seems so unfair. So again, it raises the question “Why?” We will give that paragraph the heading: *“The Servant – what he lost”*.

Finally we come to the fifth paragraph, verses 10–12, and once again we find that our questions are answered, because we see the outcome of all the injustices that the Servant endured. We see the rewards the Servant won. We see what he gained. So we will give that final paragraph the heading: *“The Servant – what he gained”*.

So that is our outline of this Song: Stanza 1: the Puzzle of the Servant. Stanza 2: the Servant – what he suffered. Stanza 3: the Servant – what he achieved. Stanza 4: the Servant – what he lost. Stanza 5: the Servant – what he gained.

THE PUZZLE OF THE SERVANT

Well, let us look then at stanza 1, which begins at chapter 52 verse 13. And you will see that the first two verses of the passage spell out the puzzle – the paradox – in the starkest possible way. It is as if Isaiah holds up before us two pictures of the Servant: the Servant successful, triumphant, exalted; the Servant battered, rejected, brutalised, mutilated. Do you see? Verse 13: “See my Servant will act wisely” – or as the NIV margin has it – “my Servant will prosper.” “He will be raised, and lifted up, and highly exalted”. Three phrases piled up on top of each other to tell us that there is no limit to the splendour, the majesty, the dominion of the Servant. He will be raised – no, that is not a strong enough word; he will be lifted up – no, more than that; he will be highly exalted! He will take the highest place. The Servant will sit on the throne, lifted up to the highest place in the universe. Men will gaze upwards and see the Servant enthroned in unimaginable splendour, high above all earthly kings, “the highest place that heaven affords is his by Sovereign Right.” “Look at him, look at him”, says the Sovereign Lord, “Look at my Servant, see where I place him – high above all powers and authorities, all rule and dominion and every name that can be named – not only in the present age but in all ages to come. Look at my servant – he shall reign for ever and ever – all nations shall bow before him – all peoples shall serve him – look at my servant – look at the king!” Verse 14: “Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.”

It is as sudden as that. One moment we are looking at the king in his majesty and glory. The next we are looking at a face that has been battered beyond all recognition; a face that is no longer human. We are looking at a figure so horrible, so disfigured that people who see him are appalled – they are sickened. They just do not want to look at him. He is not a man any longer – he is just the smashed remains of a man.

You see how Isaiah just puts those two pictures side by side. The Servant is the highest, the most exalted of men. The Servant is disfigured and mutilated till he no longer looks like a man at all. Can this really be the same man? Can this really be God's plan for his Servant? It is so bewildering. It is unthinkable. Isaiah says in verse 15, "The Servant will sprinkle many nations". That is one translation. But you will see in the margin of the NIV, "Many nations will marvel at him" – he will astonish many nations. All over the world people will hear about the Servant. They will be shown these two pictures – God's Servant exalted, God's Servant ruined and smashed, and they will be astonished. Kings will shut their mouths because of him. They will be so taken aback they will have nothing to say – they are dumbfounded. This is something they cannot come to terms with. They are seeing something, they were never told before – that is the second half of verse 15; they are having to grasp something they have never heard before.

I tried to show you from the third Song how absolutely contrary God's plan is to all human experience, all human expectations. If Isaiah had been daydreaming, imagining a great Deliverer coming to rescue the world, what sort of career would he have dreamed up for his hero? Glorious

campaigns. Huge victories. Universal triumphs. But no, when Isaiah looks forward through the mists of time to see the great Deliverer, what does he see? He sees the face of a man who weeps and says, "I have spent my strength in vain". He sees that face covered in blood; he sees the Lord's great champion being broken, laughed at, spat upon. It runs against all human expectations.

Somehow we need to regain the sense of amazement that Isaiah felt when he first glimpsed these things from afar off. We know the story of the cross so well. And, perhaps we have lost that sense of amazement, of bewilderment, that Isaiah speaks of here. When the message of the cross first broke upon the world, people were dumbfounded, astonished. Jews said, "That is blasphemous. How can the Messiah die on a cross?" Romans said, "That is ridiculous. How can a helpless broken man rule the world?" Greeks said, "That is foolish. How can a convicted criminal be part of God's wise plan?" None of them could take it in. And yet so often we simply take it for granted. Oh yes, of course, we all understand what the Bible teaches: God's Son died on a cross. God's Son died on a cross?! The glorious, infinite Creator and King of the Universe hung between two thieves, covered in blood and spittle, choking, crying, suffocating, dying? If we are not amazed, bewildered, almost terrified by that thought, then surely we have never really grasped what we are saying.

"'Tis mystery all. The immortal dies. Who can explore the strange design? In vain the first born cherub tries to sound the depths of love divine. 'Tis mercy all, let earth adore, let angel minds enquire no more!" Charles Wesley was a man overwhelmed by the extraordinary truth. It is

a pity that great hymn is usually set to the tune called Sagina. That is a triumphant, bold, confident tune. But that hymn – at least its opening verses – should be whispered. It is a man, amazed, bewildered, dumbfounded, asking one question after another. Can it be?! Died he for me? Who can explore this strange design? And it is that note that should be in our voices when we speak of Jesus Christ the Servant of the Lord, and the strange plan of God. ‘Tis mystery all, let earth adore.

That then is the first stanza of the Song. It shows the extraordinary paradox, the mystery: the Servant exalted above all men; the Servant disfigured and disgraced beyond all men. How?? Why?? Who can explore the strange design?

THE SERVANT – WHAT HE SUFFERED

Now I want to move very briefly through the second stanza: “The Servant, what he suffered.” Isaiah is taking another look, a closer look at the different ways in which the Servant suffered. The stanza begins with a question. And again it stresses how bewildering, how strange it all is. “Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” The Servant is the Lord’s arm. In the earlier songs, he was spoken of as God’s weapon, God’s instrument; but now Isaiah makes it even more personal. He is God’s arm, God’s power acting in this world. But who would recognise that? Who would believe that the figure Isaiah goes on to describe could be God’s arm? We are told four things about the Servant. Firstly, *his background*. “He grew up before him like a tender shoot,

and like a root out of dry ground.” Do you see the picture? You have got a patch of waste ground, dry and barren. And you cannot imagine anything growing there. It is the most unpromising situation. When the Servant of the Lord came into this world, where did he spring up? In a dirty village in Palestine; in a peasant home; in a carpenter’s workshop; in a village school. Who would have expected to find the King of Kings sweeping the floor in a village workshop? But that was the barren ground in which the Servant of the Lord sprang up.

Secondly, *his appearance*. People’s image has become so important. If you want to rise to the top in politics today, you must have the right image. So a man who wants to be the Prime Minister or President of his country has a whole squad of people to help him maintain the right image. They groom his hair; they advise him on his clothes; they show him how to carry himself. He has to look the part: attractive, fashionable, dynamic, friendly – and yet dignified. You have to be able to show by your outward appearance that you are someone special. But what about the Servant? “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him”. There is nothing to mark him out. He is so ordinary. God’s Servant, God’s Son, is dressed in a homespun robe. His hands have been calloused by hard work in a carpenter’s shop. He looks like what he is: a workman, a peasant.

Thirdly, *his reception*. “He was despised and rejected by men...”, and again, at the end of verse 3, “he was despised and we esteemed him not.” The mark of a great leader is that wherever he goes, you have people applauding,

cheering, welcoming him. He has a team of people who go ahead of him to make sure that he gets the welcome he would like. But when God's Servant appears, what sort of reception does he receive? He is despised. People sneer at him, treat him as scum. We have seen this in the earlier songs. He is treated as a joke and laughed at. And he is rejected. People do not want him. He offers them his protection, his care, his *love*, and they throw it back in his face. You know – some of you – what it is to be rejected. Maybe you wanted your father to love you; but you never felt he wanted you. Maybe you feel that your children have rejected you; they just do not want to know you, to spend time with you. All the love you have given them has been thrown back in your face. Maybe, you gave your heart to some girl, some young man – and you can feel still the pain of being rejected when they walked away. Some of you went as a minister to a congregation, and you were willing to love those people and to serve them – you gave yourself to them – you held nothing back – and they rejected you. There is nothing that hurts as much as when you offer your love to someone – and then it is thrown back in your face. I suppose every Christian has to go through it at some time – and especially every pastor. Paul's heart was broken by the Corinthian Christians. You remember what he wrote: "I have opened my heart to you. I do not hold back my love from you. But you have closed your heart to me. You are my children. Can you not open your hearts to me?" That is the pain of rejection. And when we feel like that, never forget that the Servant of the Lord tasted the bitterness of being rejected. His own brothers did not believe in him.

And then fourthly, *his experience of life*. I am using that very general phrase to emphasise the fact that he hurt. His whole life was a life of hurting. He was – verse 3 – “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering”. When we think of the sufferings of Jesus Christ, often we think only of those last dreadful days leading up to the cross. But no, his whole life was overshadowed by pain. He was *familiar* with suffering. Pain was a constant companion. I think he was lonely all his life; he must have been. There was never anybody who really understood him. You see that in the gospels very clearly. There are people who love him and are close to him – John especially, but there is no-one who really understands him, and the burdens he is carrying. At all the most agonising moments of his life, he is alone. He is alone in the wilderness, he is alone in the garden, he is alone in the darkness of Calvary. There are times when he longs so much for human companionship. Do you remember that cry of hurt in the garden: “Could you not have watched with me for one hour?” And the answer is “No – they could not – because they did not understand. They did not understand the crushing burden that was breaking his heart.” Constantly there were crowds around him, demanding his attention, asking him to carry the weight of their problems – but he has got no-one – no-one on whom he can lean, no-one to take the burden off him. No-one to say, “Come on now, you have done enough – I’ll take over now.” He is a man of sorrows – and he carries those sorrows alone.

The life of the Lord Jesus here on earth is a life marked by loneliness, fear, hunger, thirst, temptation. The cross throws its shadow back over the whole life.

So you can see how in every way, the life of God's Servant is so different from all that human wisdom would have predicted. His background, his appearance, his reception, his life story – and yes, his death, there is a mystery about it all.

And so, we ask ourselves – and maybe Isaiah asked himself – why did it have to be so? Yes, we know it was the Lord's will, the Lord's purpose, but why. And at last, as we move to the third stanza, we begin to understand the answer. We see what all this achieved.

THE SERVANT – WHAT HE ACHIEVED

This is the great emphasis in these verses – all that he suffered in life and in death was *for us*. You see how the words – we, us, our – pound through these verses like a drumbeat. *Our* infirmities – *our* sorrows – *our* transgressions – *our* iniquities – *our* peace. *We* are healed. *We* have gone astray – each of *us* – the iniquity of *us* all.

Notice the four ways in which sin is viewed in verse 5. The first word that is used is the word “*transgressions*”. He was pierced for our transgressions. The word ‘transgress’ in English means to cross – to cross a line, to cross a boundary. And the Hebrew word has the same sort of force. It means the specific ways in which we have crossed God's law – our particular sinful acts and words and thoughts – the sins of which we can say: “I did such and such a thing on such a day, at such a time. I broke God's law.” *He* was pierced for *our* transgressions. We have broken God's commandments in specific particular ways – well, then his body must be pierced through by

particular agonising wounds: his feet, his hands, his head, his side, his heart. The open wounds in the body of Jesus declare to the world what my sins deserve at the hands of God.

But there is more. The second word that Isaiah uses to describe sin: the word “*iniquities*” – “he was crushed for our iniquities”. And this goes deeper. It goes beyond individual acts of sin. The word means all the sinful traits, all that is perverse and rotten in me. The problem is not just that I have done selfish deeds, but that I am a selfish man. It is not just that I have said proud things – it is that I am a proud man. It is not just that I have had lustful thoughts – it is that lust is part of my very character. These are our iniquities – not just what we have done but the sick, ugly, twisted things that are part of us – that are there all the time. The problem is not just what I have *done* but what I *am* – a greedy, proud, selfish self-centred, deceitful person. There are sins of character that go to the very root of our being – the Bible calls them our iniquities – all that is perverse and shameful in us. And we are told here that he was crushed for our iniquities. It is not enough that he should be pierced with specific wounds. His whole being must be crushed. He must be utterly crushed, a broken, shattered ruin of what was once a man. His body must be turned into a mangled pulp of bleeding flesh. His mind must be shattered by a level of pain beyond imagination. His heart must be broken by an agony of despair beyond words. He must be crushed because that is what deserves to happen to a man like me – a man so twisted and distorted by pride and greed and deceit. He is not only being punished for

what I have done. He is being punished for all that I am. And that means he must be crushed, smashed, under the weight of the infinite anger of God

And then the third way we look at sin – in the second half of verse 5: “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him”. And you see what lies behind that word “Peace.” There is the suggestion that we were *at war with God*. The problem of sin is not just that I have done specific wrong things. It is not even just that I have a twisted perverted heart. It is that I have *rebelled* against God, that I have wickedly declared war against him, and that he has rightly declared war against me – he has sworn to punish my rebellion. And so we are told here that the Servant was *punished* for our rebellion. He was punished to restore us to peace with God. Calvary is *punishing*. It is the eternal and infinite God pouring out his infinite anger against this one helpless man. It is God treating the obedient one as the ultimate rebel. All the fury of God against man’s rebellion, man’s ingratitude, man’s idolatry, it blazes out against this one fragile human being. That is the meaning of Calvary, not just a man pierced by nails and spears and thorns. Not just a man broken by sorrow. But a man smashed by the hammer of God’s anger, a man driven into the outer darkness, a man scorched and gutted by the holy hatred of God against sin. He was punished. And his punishment was God’s response to human rebellion.

And then the fourth word – the fourth way we are to view sin – you will find in the last line of verse 5. “And by his wounds we are healed”. The picture here is one of *sickness*. And I believe that it is used here to

remind us of all the destructive effects of sin here in this world – all the things sin has brought upon us: physical sickness, pain, old age, death; and also mental illness, tragedy, broken relationships. You look at mankind and you see that mankind is *sick* in all these ways. And the servant dies for our healing. He dies to deliver us from all these things. Even here *in this world*, in some measure, believers may find healing. Broken minds in some measure can be mended. Broken families can be healed. Sorrows can be soothed. Even here in this world, we can say, “By his stripes we are healed.” And one day we shall live in a world where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. And that world has been won for us by the suffering of the Servant. One day we will be whole men and women. Our decaying bodies, our damaged personalities will all be healed. And it will all be because of the Lord Jesus and his death for us.

CHRIST’S ATONEMENT IS COMPREHENSIVE

These verses are the great classic statement of atonement, of how the Lord Jesus paid the price for our sin. They tell us three things about the death of the Lord Jesus, about the atonement he made. First of all, it was *comprehensive*. We have talked about all the different dimensions of sin that we have here. This passage gives us the assurance that at the cross, the Lord Jesus dealt with my sin in all its aspects, once for all. My transgressions, all of them, once for all have been dealt with. The ugliest sins; the sins I have repeated over and over and over again; the secret

sins that nobody else knows about; the sins that have brought the most public shame on the name of my God; the sins I have committed defiantly in the face of all God's warnings; the sins that have done most damage to other people; the sins I have committed as a minister. They were laid on him – all of them. He was wounded for my transgressions. There are moments when the memory of past sins floods back into the mind, and I am overwhelmed when I realise how unforgivable those sins are. And then I remember that wounded body, and I look at Jesus crucified and I say, "Those sins, yes those particular sins were laid on him – they are no longer mine – he made them his own – and he paid for them."

But that is not enough is it? It is not enough to know that those particular sins have been dealt with. God may be able to forgive me for what I have done. But can he forgive me for what I am? Can he forgive me for being the twisted, sick, proud, unbelieving man that I am? And the answer is, "Jesus the Servant was crushed for my iniquities". And I believe that God can love me in all my twistedness and shame; and more than that, I believe he can remake me and cleanse me from all iniquity. The cross of Jesus deals with my transgressions. It deals with my iniquities. It guarantees me God's friendship, God's smile – our rebellion is pardoned and we have peace with God. The cross guarantees that all the consequences of my sins have been dealt with. I can bring to God the ugliest and vilest of my sins and I can say, "Please work it for good – bring good out of my evil."

And because of Jesus he will do so. The atonement is comprehensive. It meets all my needs as a sinner.

CHRIST'S ATONEMENT IS PARTICULAR

The atonement, secondly, is *particular*. The price Jesus paid was not just for sin in the abstract, human sin; it was for *our* transgressions, *our* iniquity, it was for *our* peace, it was so that *our* stripes could be healed. Jesus was a true substitute, standing in the place of particular people. Isaiah includes himself in the number. And he includes us if we believe in Christ. In verse 8, the Lord says, “for the transgression of *my people* he was stricken.” The Lord Jesus dies as a substitute *for the people of God*, those individuals whom God had chosen for himself. The atonement is particular.

CHRIST'S ATONEMENT IS EFFECTIVE

And that means thirdly, that the atonement is *effective*. If Jesus dies for particular people, if their sins really were dealt with comprehensively by his death, if the punishment for those sins has been exhausted completely, then those people will be saved. There is no punishment left for them to bear – Jesus has carried it all. God has no anger left for them – it has been poured out against his own dear Son. The price is paid and it cannot be required again.

We headed this section of the song: “What the Servant achieved”. What did the Servant achieve by his obedient life, by his agonising death? He rescued once and for all

a vast number of particular people. They are called “the many” in verse 11. And they *are* many – a multitude that no-one can number. Once for all, he wiped their transgressions from the record. He purified them from their iniquities. He gave them everlasting peace with God. He won for them a world where all tears are wiped away, where all that is damaged about us will be healed, where even the sins of our past will somehow work for our everlasting joy and God’s everlasting glory. That is what the Servant achieved.

THE SERVANT – WHAT HE LOST

I have given the fourth stanza the heading, “What the Servant lost”. Isaiah reminds us of all that the Servant had to lose in order to carry through this great work. That is the theme of this paragraph – all the injustices he had to endure – all the ways in which he was stripped of the rights we take for granted. We hear a great deal about human rights at the moment. Everybody is very keen to assert their rights. Let us look very briefly at some of the rights the Servant forfeited.

HE LOST THE RIGHT TO A FAIR TRIAL

I am going to give you little more than headings – you must apply these matters to yourselves. *He forfeited*, first of all, *the right to a fair trial*. Verse 8: “By oppression and judgement he was taken away.” Oh yes he had a trial, but the trial itself was an act of oppression. It was fixed. He was bullied and browbeaten and people twisted his words.

And then when the courts could not find anything that he had done wrong, they sentenced him anyway and got rid of him.

Let me say to those of you who are ministers. Are you willing to accept this? To accept that as a servant of the Servant you have forfeited the right to a fair trial? Dreadful things, unjust things happen *in churches*. Pastors are lied about, their words are twisted, they are dismissed in the most cruel ways. And they accept it. They do not go to industrial tribunals and demand justice. They accept that injustice is a part of following Christ. And they carry on loving those who have lied about them, and they carry on praying for those who have hurt them. It does not matter what verdict men pass on them here on earth, providing that in another court, in a higher court, they have the approval of the only judge whose verdict matters.

HE LOST THE RIGHT TO DEFEND HIMSELF

Secondly, *the Servant forfeited the right to defend himself*. Verse 7: “He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” We want so much to defend ourselves. When we know that people are going round saying things behind our backs, we want so much to go round all the church members in turn and tell them the things *we* know about *those people*, and put the record straight. And we tell ourselves that it is because if lies are spread about us, if our reputation is damaged, our usefulness will be impaired. Well, the Servant’s reputation was damaged.

He was held up before the world as a blasphemer, a fraud, a man cursed by God. And he did not defend himself. We read in the gospels, “He answered not a word.” Peter in his first letter describes what he himself saw there in the courtyard in the High Priest’s house: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Peter remembered that scene all his life. Do you think Peter could ever say, “I have got the right to defend myself”?

HE LOST THE RIGHT TO A NORMAL FAMILY LIFE

Thirdly, *the Servant forfeits the right to normal family life*. Verse 8: “By oppression and judgement he was taken away and *who can speak of his descendants?*” He dies childless. He has forfeited the right to enjoy normal family life – the right to be married, to have children – if these things clash with the work God has given him to do. He is the most affectionate man who ever lived. He loves to gather the children around him and take them on his knee. But he will never have children of his own. He has accepted that obedience to the Father comes before emotional happiness, before personal fulfilment. He has forfeited the right to a normal family life.

I believe that we are desperately in need of men who will accept singleness as the price for Christian usefulness. The great pioneering work of mission has largely been done by men – and women – who have been willing to pay that price, following the Servant. Perhaps the cost has been higher for the women than for the men in many ways.

Mary Slessor, Amy Carmichael – only eternity will know what obedience to the Servant meant for them. There are inner-city housing areas and slums in many countries of the world that are cesspits of evil. I believe they will only be reached by single men. No man could take a family into those places.

And for those of you who are married, I would ask you to meditate simply on one text and to ask yourself what it means. 1 Corinthians 7 verse 29: “From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none”. I didn’t say that; Paul did. And I would ask you, “Are you serving God with the same hunger that you did before you got married? Are you serving him with as single-minded a zeal as you did back then?”

HE LOST THE RIGHT TO A LONG LIFE

Fourthly, *he forfeited the right to a long life*. Look at the second half of verse 8: “He was cut off from the land of the living.” Cut off. It is like a tree that is not allowed to grow to its full height, flourish and then die naturally. It is cut down. He was cut down when he was about thirty years old.

How long do you expect to live? How long is it your right to live? It may be that the Lord will call you into some work that will cut your life short. Does he have the right to do that? Henry Martyn was burned out when he was 29. Whitefield died in his fifties mind and body worn out by those extraordinary exertions. Do you know, the men and women who first took the gospel to West Africa – Nigeria, Sierra Leone – do you know how long

they lived on average after they arrived in these countries? Six months. They went there to die. They knew they were going to die. But they were determined to plant a flag on that beachhead before they died. It did not matter whether they lived six months or sixty years. That was the decision of the Master. They were servants.

HE LOST THE RIGHT TO AN HONOURABLE BURIAL

Fifthly, *he forfeited the right to an honourable burial*. Verse 9: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth”. You know it was so important for Jewish folk to be buried in the family grave. You know the phrase in the OT – ‘he was gathered to his fathers.’ Only a wicked man would be buried alone. The Lord Jesus even in his burial was put to shame. He was buried like a criminal in a grave donated by a rich man. There was no public commemoration service, no great memorial stone paying him honour. Even in death, he was despised and rejected.

Do you see how he forfeited every right? And I do not believe it is possible for us to be faithful servants of Jesus Christ unless we are willing to forfeit those rights that others take for granted. We have to lose those things. These are the things that the Servant lost.

THE SERVANT – WHAT HE GAINED

But what did the Servant gain? Back in our third paragraph, we learned of the wonderful and glorious things the Servant won for us. But we still may be feeling a sense of the unfairness of it all. You can imagine someone saying: “Alright I understand now. I see why it was necessary for the Servant to suffer. I see what God’s purpose was in it all. But it still seems so unfair on him! What did *he* gain out of it all?” And it is that question that is answered in the last stanza. What did the Servant gain? We can consider three things:

HE GAINED A LIFE HE CANNOT LOSE.

Verses 10 and 11 (as in the reading in the Qumran scrolls): “he shall see light after the travail of his soul...” The Servant is the first man to defeat death completely – and to win himself the right to eternal life. “He shall prolong his days.” He forfeited the right to a long life and accepted death, but he has now been rewarded with the prospect of a life that can never end, a life of ever-increasing joys at the Father’s right hand. And he is not in the same position as Adam was before the Fall. Adam was not *certain* to die, but he was *capable* of dying. Rather, now, having died already and conquered death, the Servant is *incapable* of dying. It is *impossible* for him ever to die again. He has crossed the river and emerged to the other side.

HE GAINED A FAMILY HE CANNOT LOSE

While here on earth he sacrificed the right to a normal family life and especially the right to have children: “Who shall declare his generation?” But now he has so very many millions of people whom he views as his children: “He shall see his seed”. Think of the excitement and the joys that parents feel when they see their children being born; as they watch them beginning to walk and learning to talk; as they teach them; as they recognise their own likeness in them. Children with all their faults and problems are still a source of joy to their parents. And Christ is thrilled as he sees one after another of his elect coming to the new birth and then beginning to grow, to mature, to learn.

And he has won the right to do wonderful things for these children whom he loves. He has won the right to justify them (verse 11). He was found guilty in Man’s court, though he was completely innocent. Now the Servant’s children are declared innocent in God’s court though they are terribly guilty. The Servant has won the right to deliver them from their iniquity: “He bears it away” (verse 11 – last line).

Christ considered the cross a small price to pay in order to purchase children for himself, children who are freed from guilt and depravity, children who love and take delight in him.

HE GAINED A POSITION HE CANNOT LOSE

Verse 10: “the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand”. He has won for himself the right to share the throne of God, to carry through all the purposes of God,

to bring to pass the will of God perfectly. (We see the same picture in Revelation chapter 5, where the Lamb is at the centre of the throne, with the scroll of God's decree in his hand, carrying out all God's purposes infallibly).

For Jesus, this is the ultimate reward: that he is able to bring his Father honour, glory and pleasure, by carrying out all the Father's will.

So, the Servant is not seen here in this passage as someone who has suffered terrible things, but who has just about managed to survive, despite tremendous loss. Rather the Servant is shown to be a totally triumphant conqueror, one who is far richer after the battle than he was before, for he carries off the plunder after the battle! (Verse 12). The promise was made: "He shall be satisfied!" (verse 11). And that promise was sure. Christ reigns in heaven now, and has no regrets! The cross was not a terrible tragedy, but a tremendous triumph. For the Lord's Servant, the cross was the way to victory, to life, to fullness of joy in his Father's presence for all eternity! To him be the glory, for ever, Amen!

JESUS: SUFFERING SERVANT, SOVEREIGN LORD

5

UNDERSTANDING

PHILIPPIANS CHAPTER 2

In this study and the next, we will be looking at what has been called the “Christ-hymn” of Philippians 2 – that is to say, Philippians 2:5–11. And I shall be trying to show you that we can only understand the real impact of this passage when we understand the social and political situation that Paul was addressing. I am not going to attempt a complete exegesis of the passage. We are simply going to be looking at it from that point of view.

In Philippians chapter 2, and indeed throughout the letter to the Philippians, Paul is responding to the claims of the Roman state, and especially those of the Roman Emperor. The language of Philippians 2 is language that echoes a particular school of political Greek writing. And we will only see the real force of Paul’s words when we see

them in that context. So let us begin by sketching in a little of the background.

PHILIPPI AND THE EMPERORS

Philippi was a Greek city. It was one of the most important cities in the part of Northern Greece we now call Macedonia. Macedonia was – and still is – one of the poorest areas of Greece. It is a barren, mountainous area. Philippi was not a great prosperous city – not a centre of culture or trade. And yet Philippi could claim to have a special place in history.

The city was founded 350 years earlier by a great king of Macedon, Philip II. He named the city after himself. It was Philip who really made Macedon a power to be respected on the world stage. And then Philip was succeeded by his son, Alexander the Great.

Now Alexander was by any standards, one of the greatest soldiers and rulers of all time. He was a military and political genius. After his father's death, he became king of Macedon, then ruler of all Greece – and then he led his armies in a series of astonishing campaigns against one country after another. He carved out a huge empire that stretched all the way to India.

But Alexander was more than just a military genius. He was an international statesman of huge vision. He brought peace to the empire he founded. All the world – from Egypt to India – was united under this one great Emperor, Alexander. All across this empire, Alexander built great roads to link up distant places. You could travel from one end of the empire to the other swiftly and safely. Wherever you went you could use the same coins,

stamped with Alexander's head. Wherever you went, you would find people speaking Greek. Wherever Alexander's rule stretched, he commissioned architects and artists who built great buildings and carved wonderful statues. He built libraries so that scholars could study and knowledge would grow. Alexander's achievements were huge. People thought of Alexander as a god – a god who had come down from heaven to bring peace and wisdom and prosperity to the world. And they worshipped Alexander as divine.

You can imagine how proud the people of Philippi were to remember Alexander – this amazing king who had grown up among them in Macedon, who had ridden with his father through their streets, but who had gone on to build the greatest empire the world had ever seen, who had been worshipped across the world. People in a town like Philippi remembered Alexander with awe; they talked about Alexander; they still told stories about Alexander's battles and Alexander's victories; and of course, the stories grew bigger and more wonderful each time they were told.

Listen to the way one 1st century Greek writer speaks of Alexander and his achievements. Alexander

“did not overrun Asia like a pirate nor did he think to rend and strip bare Asia as plunder and spoil, coming his way by unlooked-for good luck... (but his task was to spread the gospel of Hellas over the barbarian world). He wished to show all things on earth to be obedient to one ‘logos’ (to reason, wisdom) and to be of one city (Greek: politeia), and all men to be one demos, and thus he fashioned himself (Greek: heauton eschematizen).”

That was the way Alexander was viewed three hundred years after his death. His work was to spread the gospel –

the good news of Hellas – of Greek culture and civilisation to all the world. His work was to unite all things on earth under his own rule; to bring them into obedience to heavenly wisdom and reason. His work was to unite all men as one great city, one people. And he fashioned himself – he took on a form, an appearance that was appropriate for such a destiny. Some of you may have seen statues of Alexander – the superb, rippling muscles; the handsome features; the regal poise and dignity. “Of course”, says Plutarch, “this is the appearance, the form that befits the one who is destined to rule and unite the world.”

And yet people had to admit that Alexander failed. He died – just 32 years old – and the vast empire he had built by his charisma and energy fell apart. His four generals fell out among themselves, and the empire collapsed into civil war and confusion. Listen to how that quote from Plutarch carries on:

“If the god who sent Alexander’s soul had not so swiftly recalled him, one law would have shone light on all men and they would have lived with a single justice in view as a common light. But as it is, a part of the earth remains without light, wherever men did not see Alexander.”

Do you see? Alexander, this divine being, was sent down from heaven, shining with majesty and power, winning battles, building empires, bringing light to the world. But his life is cut short at the age of 32 and so his work is left unfinished

It took 300 years for another figure to come on the world stage to carry on Alexander’s work. And the strange thing was that again this Emperor had connections with the town of Philippi. He was not a Greek – he was a Roman.

We are talking about Octavian. In 42 BC the Roman Empire was in the throes of civil war. And a great battle was fought at Philippi. And that battle was the first step by which a young man called Octavian became Emperor of Rome. Later he took the title Augustus – Augustus Caesar. And like Alexander, 300 years earlier, Caesar ruled the world – he ruled over a greater empire than Alexander ever had – Europe, Asia Minor, Egypt, North Africa – it was all under the control of this one man. He imposed peace – the Roman Peace – on millions of men and women who had previously been at war with one another. Again he built great roads. People could travel safely without hindrance from one end of the empire to the other, using Roman coins, speaking Latin or Greek – both were official languages. Everywhere Augustus ruled, there was civilisation and order and peace.

And Augustus never forgot the town of Philippi where he had won his decisive victory. Many of his old soldiers were given grants of land round Philippi. And Augustus gave Philippi the official status of being a Roman colony. That was a great honour. It meant that all the citizens of Philippi were automatically citizens of Rome with full rights. To all intents and purposes Philippi – up there in the remote region of Macedonia – became part of Rome.

People in Philippi were so conscious of their status as *Romans*. The constitution of Philippi was modelled on that of Rome. The city was laid out in imitation of Rome. The architecture was borrowed from Rome. The people spoke Latin and wore Roman dress. The coinage of the city carried Roman inscriptions. The people of Philippi were more Roman than the Romans! Do you remember Acts

16:21 – the most terrible accusation that can be brought against Paul by the Philippians is that he is “advocating customs unlawful *for us Romans* to accept or practice”!

And especially it showed in their attitude to the Emperor. You can imagine how proud the people of Philippi were of *their* Emperor – Augustus Caesar – and then the line of Emperors, his heirs who followed him – Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero. Each of them in turn carried the name Caesar; each of them in turn became ruler of the vast Empire; *each of them in turn was worshipped as a god*. In Rome itself, people may not have taken very seriously the claim of the Emperor to be god – but in a place like Philippi, it was taken with utmost seriousness. The Emperor was divine; he was “equal-with-God” – that was the word that was used. He was spoken of as the Saviour, the one who had rescued the Universe. He was spoken of as the Lord.

There was no limit to the status people in a town like Philippi were prepared to attribute to Augustus and his heirs. They thought of them as completing the work that Alexander had left unfinished. Alexander had come from heaven. He had laid the foundation – but then his life had been cut short. But now Augustus had come and completed the work – and though he had died and had been given a place among the gods in heaven, still, through his divine heirs, the Empire would go on for ever and ever.

Listen to these words written about 9BC about Augustus – they are from an inscription. They deal with the question of how Augustus’s birthday should be observed:

“This day may rightly be thought of as equivalent to the beginning of all things... at any rate in terms of

the benefits it has brought. There was nothing in ruins, nothing that had fallen into a miserable appearance that he has not restored. He has given another aspect to the universe, which was ready to perish, if Caesar – a blessing to the whole of mankind – had not been born. So each individual may rightly look on this day as the beginning of his own life and physical being. There can be no more of the feeling that life is a burden, now that he has been born...

... Providence which orders the whole of human life has shown a special concern and conferred on life its most perfect ornament by giving us Augustus, whom it fitted for his beneficent work among mankind by filling him with virtue, sending him as a Saviour, for us and for those who come after us, one who should cause wars to cease, who should set all things in order. Caesar, when he appeared, not only surpassed all previous benefactors, but left no room for future ones to go beyond him. And the good news – [the evangel] – which by his means went forth into the world – had its beginning in the birthday of the God.”

That particular inscription comes from Asia Minor but it sums up exactly the way that the Emperor was viewed in a place like Philippi. He is Saviour, he is Lord; he has brought the gospel, the evangel to the world; he has saved the world from perishing. He is God.

When you came into Philippi, you were immediately aware that this was *Caesar's* city. The people thronged to the temples to burn a pinch of incense as a sacrifice to divine Caesar; their proudest boast is that they are Roman citizens, subjects of Caesar. The whole town is overshadowed by the thought of this giant superhuman

figure in Rome – who one day may come to visit his people in Philippi. You know how it is with youngsters who are obsessed with a particular footballer or film-star. They have 43 pictures of him on their wall; they have got his autograph 93 times; they try to look like him and have their hair like his. He is their hero; he is their role model. Well, that is the way *everyone* in Philippi was about Caesar. They revered the memory of Alexander; and now they worshipped the Emperor who had fulfilled Alexander's destiny – first Augustus and then his heirs – down to the one who was ruling in Paul's day – the Emperor Nero.

Now I hope you are beginning to get a feel for the sort of society these Philippian Christians had to live in – the society Paul wrote this letter into. It was a world in which Roman ideals of power and success were so important. It was a world in which people took as their role models men like Alexander and Caesar – men who had won great military victories, men who exercised great political authority, men who were possessed of great personal charisma.

And yet – what sort of men were these who were worshipped as gods in Philippi? What sort of man was Alexander? He was a brutal, greedy robber. How did he build that vast empire? He did it by savagery, by slaughtering his enemies. He was a man driven by insane personal ambition and he was willing to do the most appalling things to gain his ambitions. People may have thought of him as a god, but Alexander was no better than a beast – in his pride and greed, in his self-centred ambition and cruelty. And what about Augustus? He was another brutal man who came to

power through a series of civil wars plus the most ruthless political manoeuvrings. Again he was a man driven by naked ambition to gain power. And once he was in power, how did he keep power? By murders, by assassinations, by trickery and political craft – and all backed up by the power of his armies. And each of the Caesars followed in his footsteps. Each of them became more brutal than the one before – more insane in their ambitions, more perverted in their lusts, more greedy, more cruel, more proud, more ready to slaughter anyone who stood in their way. Utter ruthlessness, selfishness ambition: that is what marked the career of the Caesars. The Emperor who was ruling when Paul wrote this letter – Nero – is still a byword for perversion and cruelty. He maintained a rule of terror in Rome – he killed his own mother, his brother, his wife, his aunt. He delighted in the most perverted acts – homosexual rape and torture. He drove thousands of victims into the arena to die in the most horrible and sickening way – simply for his own pleasure.

And yet this man was worshipped as god by the citizens of Philippi and millions of others. That was the reality of the Roman empire. Yes – its achievements were wonderful but at its heart was bestiality, ruthless ambition, insane pride, boundless cruelty. In the end the whole empire was built on brutality – the armies of Rome slaughtered whole tribes to bring peace. One Roman historian said: “They create a wilderness – and call it peace”. And all the prosperity of Rome was built on the suffering of millions of slaves. Men, women and children were stripped of all human dignity and used like beasts by people more powerful than themselves.

This was the reality of the Empire and of the Emperor whom the people of Philippi so revered.

Now the problem with worshipping anything and anyone is that you become like the thing you worship. That is what we mean when we talk about a role model. Teenagers who adore some rock-star and are obsessed with his life are likely to imitate him. If he is immoral, that is the way they want to live. If he is into drugs or meditation or whatever, they follow suit.

People in Philippi were obsessed with being Roman – and to be Roman meant to be strong and brutal and ruthless. They were obsessed with rulers who were utterly ambitious and selfish – men who sought their own ends without thinking about the interests of anyone else. Alexander, Caesar – these were their role models. In a city like Philippi, the qualities that people admired were ambition, ruthlessness, determination. They admired people who had personal charisma; who had natural authority; who could fight their way to the top and stay there. They wanted great men – and their idea of what it meant to be a great man was drawn from such men as Alexander and Caesar. They knew that the way to achieve great things was by *strength*, by personal dynamism and authority. That was the way that Alexander had brought light to the world! That was the way that Augustus had become the Saviour of the universe!

Do you see how these values could permeate an entire community, how people could be conditioned to accept these attitudes? They saw statues of the Emperor on every street corner – and he was gigantic, superhuman, his face full of dignity and power. The children of Philippi knew

the stories off by heart of the battle of Philippi and the way that Augustus had won the Empire and saved the world by slaughtering his rivals. And so the people of Philippi were conditioned to admire these things.

You can see how those attitudes would affect *every area of life*. If a man has absorbed those attitudes, if he believes that a man must seek his own interests without thought for others – then that will affect his family life: the way he treats his wife and his children. If he believes that ruthless exercise of power is the way to success, that will surely affect his working life: the way he deals with the men who work for him. Above all, if he has absorbed these attitudes, that will affect his life in the church. A man may be a member, a deacon, an elder of the church in Philippi but if he still has as his role model the great Emperors – Alexander, Caesar – then surely that is going to affect all his thinking, and all his dealing with other men and women in the church.

You can see how different the different cultures were in which the New Testament churches had to operate – and how each had its own danger. Christians everywhere face the temptation to selfishness and pride but the form that takes can be so different in different places. You see in the New Testament how in a city like Corinth, it was mystical power, spiritual power that fascinated people. Among Jewish folk it was supernatural power, miraculous power they wanted. But in a place like Philippi the temptation was always to seek political power, the power to control and command and use other people, to dominate. It was the man who had that sort of personal power who was admired.

Now I have taken a long time to sketch in this background. And I have done so on purpose – because without that, we will not understand how radical, how revolutionary Paul’s words are here in Philippians 2.

THE TRUE ROLE MODEL: KING JESUS

Look at the qualities Paul pleads for among these Christians in Philippi. In their experience of the triune God, they have discovered encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, compassion. The language Paul uses in these verses is so graphic. They have discovered a God who encourages; who loves and comforts; who draws men into fellowship with himself; who is moved with deep surges of feeling towards them. Well now, they for their part must show like-mindedness, love, humility. They must be people bound together, he says, by a single love, feeling the same things, thinking the same things, “... having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose...” What he is saying is that there is no room for individual ambition. These Christians must abandon their personal agenda, their personal objectives – they live now for one another.

And that is exactly the opposite of all they are being conditioned to think of as normal. In a society where strength, ruthlessness, and authority are worshipped, Paul says: “I want you to be gentle; I want you to be thinking always about others; I want you to be feeling for others”. And in a society where everything encourages people to be ambitious and to seek their own status and their own pleasures and their own rights, Paul says: “Do nothing out

of selfish ambition or vain conceit. In humility consider each others better than yourselves” – not morally better – not necessarily more gifted – but more important. ‘Look at other people and think of them and their needs and their interests as more important than your own.’ “Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.”

Paul is offering a completely new strategy for “success”. The whole thinking of Philippian society says, “Success comes when great men take authority; when they exercise power; when they build power bases and control resources; when they dominate and direct”. Paul says: “The only success that matters comes when men and women forget about being great; when they forget about themselves entirely. It comes by loving others, by serving others; it comes by having no ambitions for yourself; it comes by making no attempt to be great.”

And what a role model Paul sets before these Christians! Alexander claimed, the Roman emperors claim, to be equal with God – you remember that is the word they used – they claimed to be gods. And they believed that since they were equal with God, they had the right to use their power to grab, to seize, to rape, to rob. To be equal with God, as far as they were concerned meant they could take and take and take. And that is the road to success and glory.

But now Paul as it were leads onto the stage his king, his Emperor. Here is the one who is to be their role model. “Your attitude must be the same as that of Messiah Jesus – King Jesus – who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God an opportunity to exploit, an invitation to grab”. You see how the language Paul uses echoes the

language used about the great world rulers – but oh what a stark contrast! They in their arrogance *claimed* to be equal with God, but Messiah Jesus *was* equal with God, eternally one with the Father, in very nature God. The AV has the phrase “in the form of God”; the NIV “in very nature God”. The phrase is echoing OT language – what is the “form” of God? In what form does God appear? In the form of glory! Paul is telling us that Christ Jesus is the eternal outshining of the glory of God. He is the eternal Son of God, the eternal Word of God. He shines out all the glory of the Father. He is the one in whom all the Father’s power and perfection is fully seen, glorious in being and wisdom and power and holiness and goodness and truth. To say that he was in the *form* of God does not mean that he had merely an external likeness; it means that he could shine out perfectly all that God is because he is one with God. He is the perfect likeness of God.

And yet says Paul, he did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited for his own ends, an opportunity for grabbing, for self-enrichment. That is the meaning of that rare word at the end of verse 6 that has caused so much argument among scholars. It is a word that turns up in political contexts. It was there in a slightly different form in that passage from Plutarch I read to you earlier. Would Alexander think of Asia as ‘harpagma’ – plunder, booty? In the form Paul uses the word here it means opportunity for plunder, the chance to seize and exploit.

Paul is telling us that our Christ was eternally equal with God, he had all power at his disposal, all power, all wisdom, all authority was his – but he did not think of it as an opportunity to *take*; he did not think of *himself*

– instead, he saw it as an opportunity to give, to serve. And in order to give, says Paul, he made himself nothing. Literally, ‘he emptied himself’. The great Emperor, Creator, Sustainer, Ruler of the Universe stripped off the robes of his glory and stepped into history. He made himself a nobody, a nothing. He took, says Paul, the nature, the form of a slave. The NIV in verse 7 has taken away the shock of Paul’s words by translating it as ‘servant’. But Paul says “he became a slave”. He had the form of God, the nature of God, verse 6. He took the nature, the form of a slave, verse 7. He took the outward form that was appropriate for what he had chosen to become. He had chosen to be a slave, somebody whose whole life was to be a life of humiliation and service – somebody who had no rights, somebody who could be subjected to any indignity, a nothing, a nobody.

Paul adds: “he was made in human likeness”. He was made in the likeness of men. To be a man – since the Fall – is to be a slave. Human beings live and die in slavery – slavery to sin, and to disease, and to demonic powers and to death. Now Christ in his incarnation could not share our fallenness, our sinfulness, but he could come in the *likeness* of our fallen humanity. He could come in a body appropriate to a slave – a body subject to pain and weariness and hunger and thirst and death – a body of humiliation – a body that it was a humiliation to wear.

This is the meaning of the incarnation. The Emperor becomes a slave. God becomes a man. He does not cease to be God, but he takes the nature of a man, a body of humiliation. And in that nature, in that body, he lives the

life of a slave. He is born to a destitute woman in a stable; he grows up as a peasant in a carpenter's workshop; he becomes a homeless wanderer with nowhere to lay his head; he is one of a nation of slaves, living as a Jew under the oppression of Rome, ordered about by every passing soldier. The Emperor lived as a slave – in the stable, in the workshop, on the hills of Galilee. That was his choice. He could have overthrown the Roman government which had stolen his honours – but he put himself under their authority and paid their taxes. He submitted to their laws; he surrendered to their soldiers; he bowed his head in their courts.

He submits like any slave. He works like any slave. He accepts humiliation like any slave. He is despised and sneered at like any slave. And this is the Emperor! The Lord of Glory! This is the one from whom and through whom and for whom all things exist.

Do you see the extraordinary contrast with the Roman Emperors? They are men – mere men – but they are determined to make themselves equal with God – to subdue others, to rule others, to be admired, praised, exalted. And he is God yet he is willing to become a man, a slave, submitting, serving, working, unknown, unrecognised, despised and rejected.

So Paul in verse 6 has spoken of the eternal glory of Christ. In verse 7 he has spoken of the incarnation – the self-humiliation of Christ. But there was a further humiliation to follow. Paul is sketching out the chosen career of the Son of God – and that career is a career of progressive humiliation. The step of incarnation is the first step. But then that man – the man Jesus must take

a further step in humiliation. Paul says – verse 8 – “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death – even death on a cross”.

“HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF...EVEN TO DEATH ON A CROSS.”

He has consented to be a slave. And to be a slave is to be humiliated. But how far is he willing for his humiliation to go? To be a slave is to be obedient. But how far will his obedience stretch? Yes, his life is a life of humiliation – of rejection, of obscurity, and yes, in obedience to his Father, he submits and obeys through every moment of that humiliating slavery. But now his humility, his obedience must face the final test. He must go to the garden of Gethsemane and there, shaken with terror, writhing in anguish, he must cry, “Not my will but yours be done” – and he must be obedient unto death. And that death must be the death of a cross. Why? Because that is the death appropriate to a slave – it is what Roman writers called the *servile supplicium* – the slave’s punishment – the most humiliating, shameful, agonising death conceivable.

That is the final step in the “career” of the Son of God – the career he chooses for himself. That is Paul’s stress – these are the things the Lord of glory chooses as his path: he made himself nothing; he took the nature of a slave; he humbled himself; he became obedient unto death. This is the career he chooses – it brings him from infinite glory on the throne of heaven to absolute ruin and shame on the cross of Calvary.

By all human standards it is a career of absolute failure. Look at that figure on the cross – it is a figure of absolute weakness, failure, shame. The king of glory has chosen the career of a broken slave, a condemned criminal; he ends it on a cross. It seems a career of utter waste; a life thrown away. And yet this was the path he chose; the path that obedience demanded.

And this is the role model Paul sets before the Philippian Christians. When Paul paints a portrait of a true Man, he does not point to the superhuman figure of Alexander as the artists portrayed him – gigantic, magnificent. Do you remember Plutarch saying that was the *schema* – the outward appearance that Alexander chose when he came down as a god to earth? Well – what was the schema that the Lord of glory chose? And Paul points us to a writhing, disjointed, bloodied figure hanging on a cross. Paul's role model is not Caesar, on his throne surrounded by courtiers, issuing commands, trampling down enemies. Paul's role model is this Jesus, humiliated, betrayed, lonely, heartbroken, but still believing, still submitting, still obeying his Father, still loving his enemies, still praying for them. You must be like him, says Paul. You must be like him.

JESUS' CAREER: OBEDIENCE, HUMILITY AND SUFFERING

How are we going to sum up this man Jesus and his career? We will sum it up in three words. It is first, *a career of obedience*. In obedience, the Son of God became a man. In obedience, the man Jesus lived every moment of his life. In obedience he submitted to the cross of Calvary

with all its shame. “In the volume of the book it is written of me: Lo, I come to do thy will; in the volume of the book it is written of me”.

And then secondly, it is *a career of humility*. At each step in this career, the King is not thinking of himself. He has forgotten himself, his needs, his wishes, his desires. It is his Father’s will that matters; it is the needs of others that come first. He lives as a man, thinking about others; he dies for the sake of others. And for the sake of others, he will accept any humiliation. He is willing to be a nobody, rejected, despised, overlooked, sneered at. He has no ambition except the ambition to bring honour to the Father and mercy to the ruined.

And thirdly, it is *a career of suffering*. His obedience, his humility lead to appalling suffering. In his lifetime he is a Man of Sorrows. And that life has its culmination in the heartbreak and the torture and the horror and the darkness of Calvary. And willingly, this man Jesus accepts that suffering – and he accepts it to the end. That is his chosen path.

So that is the path by which Jesus will accomplish his objectives. He has no other method; no other strategy; no other programme. Turn to Caesar and ask him: “What was your strategy? How did you accomplish your goals?” And he will tell you about the alliances he made, and the victories he won, and the resources he built up. But turn to the Son of God and ask him what his strategy was and he will tell you only three things. I obeyed – I gave myself in moment by moment, relentless obedience to the commands of the Father. I humbled myself: I was willing to accept any humiliation;

to do any task; to serve the lowest and most degraded of humanity; to expose myself to any shame. I suffered: I accepted whatever suffering the Father sent. I accepted it without complaint, without bitterness, without rebellion. I obeyed. I humbled myself. I suffered.

And that is why the man Jesus sits in triumph today on the throne of heaven and earth. That is why his kingdom spreads from shore to shore. *He* made himself nothing. *He* humbled himself. *He* became obedient unto death. Therefore *God* exalted him. *God* gave him the name above every name. *God* appointed that every knee should bow before him and every tongue confess his Lordship. He sought nothing for himself and that is why today he is Emperor over a wider kingdom than Alexander or Caesar ever dreamed of – an Empire that stretches to all nations and into all eternity.

In our next study, we will be thinking about how that great principle works out in our experience. But for now there is only one question I want to leave you with. Who, what is your role model? The world puts before you role models – the gifted, the dynamic, the successful, the achievers. And then Paul puts before you his role model and it is a man who lives a life of painstaking, backbreaking obedience; it is a man who humbles himself and becomes a figure of failure – an object of scorn; it is a man who writhes in agony and breaks his heart on a cross. And I ask you as I ask myself: Is that really what you want to be? You say you want to be Christ-like. But do you really want that? Do you really want to be a man or woman who lives as a slave and dies as a slave and accepts whatever suffering God sends as the natural outcome of your slavery? May God search our hearts.

6

EXPERIENCING

PHILIPPIANS CHAPTER 2

In our previous study we began to think about Philippians 2 and the “career” of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul sets the Lord Jesus in stark contrast to the great leaders of the world. They are driven by ambition. They accomplish their ends by force. Their image is one of power and success. But the Lord Jesus lived a life of obedience. He chose a path of humiliation. He accepted suffering and ended his life on a shameful cross. And Paul holds this Lord Jesus up before us as our great role model: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”. Our motivation must be his: obedience to the Father. Our strategy must be his: service, slavery, the willingness to endure humiliation and shame. Our self-image must be his: we are not aiming to be great men, dominant, powerful, dignified. We are willing to be failures, to live lives

of suffering; to die as he died, lonely and rejected. Paul has sketched out the earthly career of Jesus. And he has told us that that must be our career as well.

But the career of the Lord Jesus Christ did not end at the cross. Between verses 9 and 11 of Philippians 2, Paul goes on to sketch out all that followed:

“Christ became obedient to death – even death on a cross. *Therefore* God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”.

The key word in the sentence is *therefore*. He humbled himself. *Therefore* God highly exalted him. He chose to be a nothing. *Therefore* God gave him the name above every name. He was willing to be a slave. *Therefore* God decreed that every creature should call him Lord. All the triumphs, all the glories of the risen Lord Jesus have come to him as the result, the reward, of that life of obedience and humility and suffering. He claimed nothing for himself. *Therefore* God gives him all things. He had no ambition for himself. *Therefore* he is worthy to be enthroned for ever. The man Jesus is worthy to share the throne of God because in his life he has shone forth God’s own qualities of infinite humility and infinite love.

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST

Now let us think for a moment about the triumphs, the vindication of the exalted Christ. Paul presents the triumph of Jesus Christ in three great declarations. First

of all, he tells us in verse 9 that “God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name”. Paul is echoing Psalm 97:9: “You, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted to the highest place above all gods”. He is telling us that the man Jesus has been granted divine honours; that he sits on Jehovah’s throne; that he carries the supreme name – the name Jehovah, the LORD. Jesus exercises sole, solitary, supreme dominion over all creation. This man – the same man who hung naked and broken on a cross – now sits on God’s throne.

You see how Paul again has in view the blasphemous claims of the Caesars. They claim to be *among* the gods. They claim a place alongside Jupiter and Juno and all the rest. But that is not Christ’s claim. He is exalted to the highest place *above* all gods. Whatever forces, whatever principalities and powers there may be in the universe, are subject to him. Each of the Caesars uses the title Lord – men speak of Caesar as *dominus noster et deus* – our Lord and God. “No” says Paul – there is only one man who has the right to carry the name Lord – the name above every name – and when we call Jesus Lord we are using the title in its fullest sense: The LORD – Jehovah – the great I AM. For all eternity, this man Jesus bears the name Jehovah. Jehovah Jesus, Jesus our LORD.

Now this is something *definitive*. This is past tense. There was a moment in time when the man Jesus was appointed Son of God with power; when he was wrapped round in the robe of divine glory; when he was caught up to the highest place to begin his reign from the throne of God. This is not something progressive. *God exalted him* – it is once for all. It is accomplished.

But the consequences of that once for all exaltation have to be worked out *progressively*. And that is what Paul goes on to tell us. Here is the second declaration: God has decreed that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. *At the name of Jesus* – Paul is stressing his humanity. At the name of the man Jesus, every creature in the universe shall kneel in submission: things in heaven, things on earth, things under the earth.

Now a quick glance at a lexicon will tell you that these terms are terms used chiefly for spiritual beings – for all the mysterious demonic powers that threaten and enslave mankind; what Paul calls elsewhere the rulers and authorities, the powers of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. Not just creatures on earth – but whatever creatures there may be in the unseen world must one day acknowledge the triumph of the man Jesus, of that man who hung on a cross, abandoned, defeated, ruined.

And says Paul, every tongue shall confess that he is Lord. There is the third declaration. You know the passage that Paul is quoting from Isaiah 45 where Jehovah declares: “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear”. But now the adoration, the worship, the praise that is due to Jehovah alone is being given to Messiah Jesus – to the man who humbled himself – to the man who obeyed, who became a nothing, who died a slave’s death on a cross. He must be acknowledged as Lord by every creature – by angels, by demons, by men.

First the definitive triumph – and then the progressive outworking: the defeat of spiritual powers and the subjection of every creature. Now the question we need to ask is this. *When* does Paul expect this to happen?

When do Christ's enemies bow the knee? *When* will every creature confess that Jesus is Lord?

And the answer is clear. Paul is looking forward to the consummation – to the parousia. It is then that *every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue confess.

But Paul is not speaking *only* of the parousia. The parousia is only to be the culmination and the climax of all that Christ has been doing since his exaltation. Paul expects to see demonic powers defeated *now*. He expects to see men and women confessing Christ's Lordship *now*. He expects to see the triumphs of Christ not just at the consummation but *now* in history. Yes – the whole vast scale of Christ's triumph will not be seen until the last day; but it must be seen on every day of this gospel age. From the moment when God exalted Jesus Christ to the highest place, from that moment, progressively, Christ's enemies are forced to submit; men and women are brought to confess Christ's Lordship.

Paul surely is remembering Christ's victory over him. There on the road to Damascus, he, Saul of Tarsus, dominated as he was by demonic pride and rage – he bowed the knee; he confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord. "Lord, what would you have me to do?" And Paul is certain that the same awesome power that smashed his resistance, must be seen throughout all nations and in all centuries, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus – that broken, tortured, defeated slave whose body hung on a cross – Jesus has defeated the whole vast empire of evil. Even now, Jesus is tearing down strongholds of Satan and subduing millions of rebel sinners to himself. That is what Paul is telling us here.

THE DIVINE PARADOX

I want you to see the vast paradox that we have here in these verses. A man abandons all ambitions for himself; a man lives the life of a slave; a man dies in misery and shame. And that is how he *triumphs*; that is how he defeats the powers of darkness and rescues mankind from their grip; that is how he forces the spiritual world into submission; that is how he wins universal sovereignty. And that is how he brings glory to God. That is Paul's bottom line – at the end of verse 11. The ultimate end of all this – “to the glory of God the Father”. A man dies, obediently. He accepts humiliation, battering, torture, loneliness, shame. And that is the appointed way in which God is glorified before all the universe

Now I say it again – how utterly different this is from all that the Philippians have been trained to believe. All through their lives they have been taught to revere great men – men who show themselves stronger, cleverer, more cunning than their opponents – born leaders, dynamic figures, people who know how to exercise authority. It is through men like that that triumphs come. It is men like that who accomplish great things. "No", says Paul – the ultimate victory belongs to a man who obeyed and who humbled himself and who suffered – a man who chose to be a nothing – a man who seemed to have been utterly defeated; a man whose life seemed to have been utterly wasted. He won the victory – the only victory that counts.

That is the one great central thought in this letter to the Philippians. If we remember nothing else, then we must remember this. How did Jesus break the power of evil? How did Jesus conquer the world? How did Jesus win the

right to sit on the throne of heaven? By becoming a slave, a servant, a figure of fun – by walking a path of obedience that led to suffering and to death. That is the great lesson we learn here.

FOLLOWING IN CHRIST'S FOOTSTEPS

Now why was it so important that Paul should preach this truth to the Christians in Philippi? Well, surely, for this reason. The Philippian Christians had to understand – and we have to understand – that this pattern is not only true for Jesus Christ. It is also true for his people – for those who walk in his footsteps.

We long to see victories won in this world. We long to see verses 10 and 11 realised in our experience and in the experience of our churches. We long to see Satan's power broken; men and women brought to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We long to see God glorified and the kingdom of God coming in power. But how are such victories to be won? They have to be won the same way that Jesus Christ won the definitive victory. They are won only when Christ's people live the same way that Christ lived – when they live lives of costly obedience and self-denial; when they humble themselves and accept humiliation; when they accept suffering as the price of obedience; when they see themselves as slaves. They forget their dignity and are willing to do the most degrading work. They forget their own hurts and weariness and press on in lives of obedience. They accept insults and abuse and pain without resentment. They live with the attitude of Christ. And it is through such people that Christ's victory in history is seen.

GOSPEL TRIUMPH IN PHILIPPI

Just think for a moment of Paul himself and how he first came to Philippi. Here he is arriving in this city, dominated by the power of Rome, the stronghold of Imperial power, a city garrisoned with Roman troops, ruled by Roman magistrates. And Paul is planning the invasion of that city, that citadel of empire. Paul and his handful of fellow-workers have been summoned from across the sea to Macedonia and they have been commanded to invade Europe. Caesar rules in the hearts and affections of the people of Philippi; he has all the power of the media, and all the machinery of commerce and government and culture to reinforce his dominion. And somehow Paul has to assault that vast edifice of power. He has to tear down the stronghold of Caesar. He has to install Jesus Christ as sovereign over the minds and hearts of men and women in Philippi. Paul is planning to plant a church in the very heartland of Roman power. He is planning to tear down the stronghold of Satan in Philippi.

But how is it going to be accomplished? Surely it is going to take a vast military operation. But no, Christ has said that his followers do not take up swords and fight for his kingdom. Well then, surely it is going to take a vast advertising campaign. We are going to need great public meetings with lots of celebrities on the platform and the local mayor as the guest of honour. We need financial backers. We need skilful PR men. We need to make sure that Paul himself has the presentation skills and the right image. After all, this is Philippi! You are taking on the whole gigantic power of Roman society. And surely this

is the way that victories are won! This is the way the Alexanders and the Caesars and the powerful men of today's world build their empires, do they not? They use all the machinery of power; all the help of the spin-doctors and the image-makers; we win victories by being dynamic and glamorous and knowing how to use the tools of power.

How was the victory of the gospel won in Philippi? Do you remember? It was won when Paul and Silas were seized by a lynch mob. And when they were stripped of their clothes and flogged They were defeated. They were humiliated. They were stripped of all dignity. And they were thrown into prison, filth , bleeding, the flesh torn off their bodies by the lash; chained in the darkness. What a humiliating end to their career in Philippi! What an utter failure! Where has obedience to Christ brought them? It has brought them to the same place as it brought Jesus – to humiliation and agony and helplessness.

And there in that place, the battle for Philippi was won. It was won when Paul and Silas lifted up their voices and sang. In their pain, in their humiliation, they sang. They proclaimed publicly their love for Christ, their willingness to suffer for him. They became obedient, they accepted all that had happened as God's will for them. They humbled themselves. They accepted the public shame and the physical pain as the cost of following Christ. They were determined to press on in obedience – even if it was obedience unto death. Their attitude was the same as that of Christ Jesus – obedience, humility, the willingness to suffer, even unto death.

That night the prison – the structure that symbolised the authority of Rome – was shaken to its foundations.

That night, the jailer – the man whose work it was to uphold Caesar’s authority – bowed the knee to Christ and confessed that Christ is Lord. That night, the grip of Satan on Philippi was broken. But how was it accomplished? By superstar evangelists, by great choirs, by vast technological resources? It was accomplished by two men who obeyed and who humbled themselves and who suffered and wept and sang and pressed on.

And that has been the pattern of Paul’s life ever since. Where is Paul now as he writes this letter to the Philippian church? He is in Rome. He is confronting the power of Caesar at its very centre now. Paul is assaulting Caesar’s capital city; he is taking on all the might of Roman government and military dominion. But how is he doing it? What is God’s strategy for the conquest of Rome?

Paul is in chains. Paul is lying in a prison-cell with chains chafing at his hands and his feet. He is helpless and hurting. Long weeks, and months go by and he is still lying there. He has been abandoned by so many of his so-called friends. There are some who call themselves brothers but who are doing all they can to make his imprisonment as painful as possible. Surely this is defeat.

And Paul says (Phil 1:12): “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard – Caesar’s guard – and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” Caesar’s palace is full of talk about Christ. Caesar’s bodyguards are talking about Christ. The saving power of Christ is penetrating right into Caesar’s most tightly guarded strongholds. But how has it been done? By harnessing the

power of the media? By manipulating political leaders? By buying quality TV time? It is been done by a man who lies suffering in a prison cell but who says, “I am content; I’ve learned in whatever state I am therewith to be content”. It is accomplished by a man who presses on in obedience; a man willing, as he says, to be well-fed or hungry, to live in plenty or in want; a man who humbles himself and accepts loneliness and humiliation and, if need be, death – a man who says, I am willing to live and I am willing to die, providing Christ is exalted in my body. That is what God honours – not great gifts, but likeness to Christ. And likeness to Christ means obedience and it means humility and it means suffering.

Where is victory won? It is won by Paul in a prison-cell, filthy and hungry – and still pleading that Christ be exalted.

It is won by Allen Gardiner on the shore of Tierra del Fuego, starving to death, abandoned, far from his home and family but still praying, still longing for the triumph of Christ in South America. “Our times are in his hands, and he can raise up others, far better qualified than we are, to enter into our labours... Whether I live or die, may it be in him”. That lonely death moved scores of men to pray and to go. His widow fifty years later could look back and write this about herself: “She was permitted to see that her husband’s work and labour of love was not in vain in the Lord. Moreover, that the countries in which his toil was greatest and his suffering worst – Araucania, the Gran Chaco, Tierra del Fuego – have his gospel openly preached”. His biographer adds. “It was all explained now. The apparently useless sufferings, the long arduous

journeys, the disappointments and setbacks, culminating in those lifeless bodies on the beaches... had all proved to be... the outworking of a divine plan.” Today thousands confess Christ is Lord because Allen Gardiner was willing to ‘waste’ his life for Christ.

Where is victory won? It is won by Mehdi Dibaj, locked for years in a prison-cell in Iran three foot by three, writing to his judges that testimony full of praise and gratitude to Jesus Christ; and then released from prison only to be stabbed to death and thrown onto a rubbish heap. That testimony reached millions.

Who are the men, the women through whom the kingdom of Satan is broken? I think of a friend of mine, labouring for twenty-nine years in an inner-city congregation in Manchester, UK, coming in week after week to clear up the broken glass and wipe the excreta off the walls of the church building, waiting for the reinforcements that never came, but still pressing on, still honouring the name of Christ in that place, working on obediently in a place where younger men were unwilling to go; humbling himself to do the most degrading tasks if only the gospel could be preached; suffering disappointments and weariness, living like a slave.

That is how the kingdom of Christ comes. I think of the lady in my congregation who just a few months back in her 50s had a stroke. She has only been a believer three years. But she loves Christ with all her heart. And now she lies on a hospital bed, paralysed down one side, unable to talk, unlikely to walk or dress herself again; but she sings. And though you cannot make out the words, you know the tune – and if you join in, she nods to let you know

you have got the right bit. And she sings: “Heaven above is softer blue; earth beneath is sweeter green; something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen; Oh this full and perfect peace; oh this rapture all divine, since I know as now I know, I am his and he is mine.” And that godless hospital ward has been penetrated by the power of Christ. And the doctors confess that they are amazed and that they have never seen this contentment and joy before. And the gospel is advanced – because a woman obeys and humbles herself and suffers.

That is the “therefore” of Philippians 2. Paul does not say: “Christ humbled himself; Christ suffered; Christ was put to public shame; Christ was crucified – *nevertheless*, he triumphed.” Paul says: “Christ became a slave; Christ lived a slave’s life; Christ died a slave’s death – *therefore* he triumphed.” Paul does not say, “I am in chains; I am hungry; I am lonely; *nevertheless*, the gospel advances.” Paul says, “I am in chains for Christ; *therefore* the gospel advances. The kingdom of Christ does not advance *despite* our failures, and our struggles, and our disappointments, and our heartbreaks. It advances *through* them.

Some of you look back over years in the ministry and all you can see is disappointment, and defeat, and hurts and heartbreak. And you feel as if you have been toiling all these years and you have nothing to show for it. But Paul tells us “that is the way the kingdom of Christ comes”. When the great day of reckoning comes, all that has been accomplished by the superstars, the empire-builders, with all their glamour and power, will be nothing and less than nothing – wood and hay and stubble. The real work of the kingdom is done by men and women who have no ambition except to serve

Christ, who are willing to live and to work in obscurity, who press on in obedience, who accept disappointment and suffering if that is God's will; men and women who see themselves as slaves.

"... TO KNOW CHRIST AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION"

Paul spells out the principle in chapter 3 verse 10. It is impossible to bring out the real force of this verse in an English translation. Paul has been talking about his willingness to lose everything that once he would have cherished – his reputation, his self-esteem, his dignity. And then in verse 10 he says this: "*I want to know Christ – and the power of his resurrection.*" He is looking back to the account he has given of Christ's career earlier, in chapter 2. He is thinking about the power that is now exercised by the risen Christ – the power to compel every knee to bow; the power to make men confess that he is Lord. Paul says: "I want to be part of that – I want Christ's authority to be exercised through *me*: I want to share his victory, his triumph."

And then he says this – "and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, *becoming like him in his death.*" Paul says: the only way I can share in the power, the triumph of Christ is by sharing in the suffering of Christ, becoming like him. That is the key phrase. It is a single word in the Greek and it is the same word that Paul used back in the Christ-hymn. Christ Jesus was in the form, in the likeness, of God. He *took* the form, the likeness of a slave. Now, says Paul, I want to take a form, a likeness like his.

I want to be a slave like him – with all that that means: the backbreaking toil, the loneliness, the heartbreak, the public humiliation, the life of sorrows and the death of shame. If being like Christ means that, then that is what I choose.

Paul is looking at the cross. He is looking at the man on the cross – a battered wreck of a man, covered in blood and spittle, naked, penniless, abandoned, crying, writhing in pain. And he says: I want to be like that man. He is my role model. I want to be like him in his obedience. I want to be like him in his humility. I want to live as he lived and die as he died. And in that way I believe I shall share in the triumph, the power of the resurrection.

Let me ask you again. What is your mental picture of the successful Christian leader? Who do we model ourselves upon? What are his qualities? Charisma, authority, presence? We should have only one role model – and he is a crucified criminal – rejected, laughed at, spat upon. Paul says: I want to be like Christ – and I know what that means – it means being a nobody, a slave; it means living a slave's life and dying a slave's death.

I am aware of the fact that not everyone reading this is a pastor; but no doubt some of you are. I am a pastor and know many pastors personally. And often we get together and how many hours we have spent complaining together! We have talked about the endless workload, and the disappointments, and the loneliness, and the slanders, and the ingratitude of men and women we have served. But what did we expect? When we entered the ministry did we not pray that we would share the power of the resurrection? Did we not pray that God would somehow

use us to glorify himself and extend his kingdom? Then did we not understand this verse? Did we not understand that we were following the Christ of Philippians 2? Did we not understand that we were asking to share the likeness of his sufferings, his death? What have we to complain about?

THE COMING SAVIOUR

I want to turn your attention to one final passage from this letter. Philippians 3: 17–20. There are those, says Paul, who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. He is talking about false teachers. They are *enemies of the cross of Christ*. He does not mean that they deny the doctrine of the atonement. He means that they deny that we must carry a cross. They deny that we have to share the sufferings of Christ; that we have to be like Christ in his slavery, his obedience, his suffering, his death. They teach that following Christ means glamour, success, prosperity. Their mind, says Paul, is on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven. That is chapter 3 verse 20. You see, Paul is taking up once again his great contrast between the people of Philippi with their values, and the people of God. The people of Philippi are so proud to be Roman citizens – their citizenship is in Rome. But now Paul says to these believers: “Your citizenship is in heaven. You do not expect to find prosperity, fulfilment comfort here in this world. You belong elsewhere. You are citizens of heaven.” *And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ*. The citizens of Philippi never forget that they have their Emperor in Rome. One day he may travel to Philippi. He may make a royal appearance. They are

eagerly awaiting that day. Paul says: “You too are living in hope. One day, the great Emperor will appear – the true Saviour.” Paul is taking up all the titles claimed by Caesar and he is piling them on Christ. He is the true Saviour. He is the Lord. And one day he will appear in royal glory.

And on that day, says Paul, we will at last see, fully exercised, the power that enables him to bring everything under his control. At last the triumph spoken of in Philippians 2 will be complete. At last every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. At last, all things shall be to the glory of God the Father.

And he will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Almost every word here echoes what Paul wrote earlier in the Christ-hymn. The phrase “lowly bodies” is literally “bodies of humiliation”. Paul is remembering the fact that Christ humbled himself – that he took the path of humiliation – that he took the form of a slave. But now Christ has been transformed. His appearance is no longer one of humiliation and shame. His appearance is the appearance of glory and majesty. And, says Paul, when he returns, he will transform our bodies of humiliation, to be *like* his body of glory. It is the same word again. He was in the form of God. He took the form of a slave. Now we are to share his form – his nature – of glory. He chose to share our suffering and shame. We choose to be one with him in his obedience, his humiliation, his death. He promises that we shall be like him in his glory and triumph.

Paul in this letter lays out his whole vision of the Christian life; what Christian service means; how the cause

of Christ is advanced; how we win our way to heavenly glory. And it is utterly contrary to all human expectations.

Let me ask you a question. What is our greatest need today? What do we need most? And the answers come back thick and fast. We need better training. We need academic credibility. We need dynamic leaders. We need seminars. We need resources. We need libraries and journals and radio stations. We need technology. And Paul says, “No, we need men and women who have the mind of Christ. Men and women who obey, and who humble themselves and who are willing to suffer; men and women who have no ambition, except the ambition to be like Christ”. May the Lord enable each one of us to be such men and women, to his glory! Amen.

7 A NEW HEAVEN & A NEW EARTH

I believe that the subject of the world to come has been desperately neglected. And I believe that the consequences of that have been disastrous. It is not difficult to document this neglect. Let me just give you a question to think about. How many books do you know of, written in the last fifty years, centring on this theme? If I were to ask you to list books on the gifts of the Spirit or on counselling or on mission, I imagine that you could give me dozens of titles. I wonder how many of you could name even one on the subject of heaven. Quite simply, it is a subject that is not seen as central in our day. Even those books where you would naturally expect to find a treatment of the subject seem to gloss over it almost as an afterthought.

So, for example, Anthony Hoekema has given us a fine treatment of eschatology in his book, “The Bible and the Future”; a book surely to stir up the believer’s hope. Three hundred and thirty five pages on what the Bible has to say about the future – nine chapters given to the return of Christ, and the events associated with it. And then, just *one* chapter – just *fourteen pages* – given to actually considering the world to come – the eternal glory of the believer. But that is what we have come to expect. It is, sadly, the usual pattern – enormous amounts of time and thought devoted to the earthly events which are to precede the return of the Saviour; tremendous emphasis on the details of that glorious return; but virtually no attention given to that new and eternal world order which is the whole goal and purpose of his return! I could not begin to calculate how many hundreds of sermons I have heard over the years concerning prophecy – but how few I have heard about the eternal glory that is to be. We seem almost to have forgotten *why* Christ is to come again: we are preoccupied with the how and the when of his coming – the packaging of the event – and we have forgotten what he is coming for and why his coming is to be longed for – we have forgotten the vision of the glory to come.

I have another volume in my study: Philip Hughes’s enormously impressive work: “The True Image”: subtitled, “The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ.” You would think from the title that we were going to have a full-blown exposition of our destiny in Christ – our ultimate destiny. What do we actually get? Four hundred and thirty pages – and only six and a half of them are given to the theme of the glory to be. It would almost seem that

eternity is an afterthought – just a postscript. (Do not take that as a criticism of these men, Hoekema or Hughes: at least they have addressed the subject, however briefly – and from what they write, I believe that it is a subject close to their hearts. My point is that for someone who wants to give thought to the subject, there is almost nothing to help them.)

For most of us, I suspect, our primary concern is *this* life and the experiences we enjoy in *this* life and the duties and the blessings we have here in *this* world. And we have forgotten that for us, *this* world is no more than a preparation for the *real* world, the eternal world, the world to come. Without the vision of the world to come, nothing has any meaning for us. The great doctrines we love and on which we concentrate lose all real meaning when this eternal dimension is forgotten: election, justification sanctification only have meaning as they issue into glorification. These terms can only be defined in relation to the glory to come. Election, justification sanctification are only means to an end – the end which is glorification. By election, I am chosen for the eternal glory. By justification I am qualified to share in that glory. By sanctification I am being prepared to live in that glory. And yet, it seems that most of us get more excited about election than about the destiny for which we have been elected! We seem to enjoy talking about justification much more than we do about the glory for which justification qualifies us!

How can we truly understand or preach any Bible doctrine without preaching the glory to come? No wonder if our people are depressed, discouraged, half-hearted,

materialistic and worldly. How could they be otherwise if they have been robbed of this glorious vision?

THE HOPE OF GLORY

It was not so for the New Testament church. The hope of the glory to come pervades every page of our New Testament. Paul can simply say, “We are saved by hope”. He can characterise believers as those who are rejoicing in the hope of the glory to come. In the face of every heart-break and every setback he preaches to himself and to his hearers the glory to come, compared with which, he says, the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be considered. He preaches the glory to come as the motive for Christian perseverance, Christian holiness, Christian joy. Every doctrine, every dilemma, every Christian duty is viewed by Paul in the light of this one great hope. The Christian hope, for Paul and for every New Testament writer, is not just one chapter in a systematic theology – rather it is, or should be, woven into every part of our Christian living, our Christian thinking, our Christian devotion. Our hope, our great driving motivation, our night and day longing must be that world where we shall see our Saviour face to face.

Let me just ask one direct question. Are you longing for the world to come? Is it something that preoccupies your heart and mind? How much of your thinking, your dreaming, your devotion is focussed on this? How heavenly minded are we?

I remember talking a little while back to a young man – a very fine Christian with, as we say, everything to live

for in this world. And I was probing a little, wanting to know something of how he was going on. And so I asked him what he saw as the most important area of spiritual change and growth over the two years we had known him. And he said simply: “In these past two years, I have begun to long for heaven”. And it shook me and I wondered how many other believers could say so simply, “I am longing for heaven”. And it forces me to examine myself and to ask, “How much am I longing for heaven?”

So that is our theme. And if, in the few minutes we have, we are stirred at all to long for the glory to come, then this session, for myself at least, will have achieved its objective. All I’m going to be able to do is give you the broadest outline sketch of the doctrine: we will not have time to apply it at all. What I am offering you is not a meal but simply the raw ingredients which I trust you will take away and turn into digestible and nourishing food.

THE WORLD TO COME

Now, let us first try to establish the precise scope of what we are talking about. Let me make it clear that in speaking of the world to come, I am not speaking about the world which Christians are to enter into at death. That is in itself a thrilling subject – but it is not our present subject. The joys into which believers enter at death are unimaginably wonderful – but even so, they are provisional and partial. The ultimate hope of the believer is not in that intermediate state of joy with Christ which we enter at death; rather we are looking forward to that new order of

things which will come about at the return of Christ. We are not looking forward merely to the deliverance of our individual souls – that will come at death – rather, we look forward to the deliverance, and glorification of the entire cosmos and that can only come at the return of Christ.

Now, as we consider this great prospect, let me divide the matter under three headings. We will move inwards step by step. Firstly, we must think about the future of the cosmos – the glory that the universe as a whole is to display. Then, secondly, we can move on to think about the future of the church – the glory of the new humanity that is to rule the universe. And then finally, we can move on to think about the future of the believer – the individual men and women who in Christ are to be the people of God through all eternity.

THE FUTURE OF THE COSMOS

First, then, the future of the cosmos. Let me turn your attention to 2 Peter chapter 3. Peter writes (beginning at verse 5):

“... long ago, by God’s word, the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By that same word, the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”

And then look at verse 10:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything in it will be

laid bare.” (Literally: “the earth and everything in it will be found.”)

And then Peter continues: verse 12:

“... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

You see the picture. The day of judgment against the ungodly, which Peter speaks of in verse 7, is also to be a day of judgment for the cosmos. The universe is to be unmade by the fire of judgment. Just as the earth in Noah’s day was plunged beneath the purifying waters of judgment, so now the whole universe is to be cast into the furnace, into the crucible of judgment. The heavens and the earth are reserved for fire

Now, what are these heavens and earth that are to be destroyed or (verse 12) dissolved. Well, as I understand it, this is simply biblical shorthand for ‘everything which has been created’. The heavens and the earth are the two great divisions of the created order according to Genesis 1. In that chapter, the earth means simply this planet – the world on which man is placed. And Peter tells us that this earth is to pass away and everything upon the earth. The natural structures of the earth will pass away: the mountains, the rivers, the oceans, the great forests all melt away in an instant. The birds and the beasts are swept away in that fire as totally as they were in the flood of Noah’s day. Indeed, the very elements become incandescent and melt; the fabric of the earth (verse 10) and the heavens (verse 12) melt in the heat. And of course, the destruction of the earth, brings with it the obliteration of all that has

been built upon the earth – the great palaces and temples and skyscrapers; the great achievements of kings and of nations through the millennia of history. Men have always dreamed of building monuments that will last for ever but in that burning heat, all monuments of human greatness are destroyed in a moment.

But it is not only the earth which passes away; the heavens, too, we are told, must pass away. Now what is meant by this? Well, in the first instance, the word heaven refers simply to the firmament – the arch of the sky above us in which the birds fly – if you like, what we call the atmosphere. That is the first heaven. And, of course, as the earth is consumed, that heaven is to be obliterated. But then beyond that first heaven, there is a second and more awesome heaven:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

(Ps 8:3, 4a)

The Psalmist looks outward at the astonishing panorama of the galaxies and he confesses that in comparison with the fearful expanses of what we would call outer space, the earth with man on it, is only a minute speck. He feels his own littleness against the unspeakable expanse of the heavens. That is the second heaven. And that too must pass away. The heavens, we read, will disappear with a roar. You must see in your mind's eye, the ultimate cataclysm as the universe and its very elements are dissolved in the heat. The great galaxies will flare up in one last great brightness

and flicker out. The panorama of the sky will be rolled up like a garment to be cast into the furnace.

But even that does not exhaust what Peter is saying. The biblical writers could look even beyond that second heaven. The galaxies were unreachable but they still belonged to the visible heavens – to the world that men can perceive with the senses. But beyond that world is the ultimate heaven – the world of ultimate reality where God himself dwells – the world of spiritual beings; the world where God's throne is set and where he sits surrounded by multitudes of worshipping angels; the world where evil powers seek to make war and to challenge the Lord's supremacy. Earth is the Lord's footstool; heaven is his dwelling-place; and by that is meant not the reaches of outer space but the world beyond, the world created by God as the habitation of spiritual beings.

And so again, it will pass away. This passage teaches that all created reality is to pass away. Those spiritual realms which we cannot see with our eyes, which we would never reach with a space probe, that world too is dissolved in the flame. Inevitably, this is harder for us to imagine but God's word allows us to use physical imagery to conceive of these spiritual realms. Scripture speaks of Satanic strongholds, and of thrones and dominions in the unseen world. And the catastrophe that engulfs this visible universe must engulf those thrones and dominions too. Christ's coming brings the end of the old heavens and the old earth.

But Christ's coming also brings about the making of a new heaven and a new earth. The old universe passes away and a new universe rises out of the crucible. The body of the universe, dissolved by the fire of judgment,

will rise again. This new universe, says Peter, is to be – verse 13 – a home for righteousness; a fit dwelling-place for the righteous God and for his righteous people. A universe from which every impurity has been refined away; a universe filled with holiness and love and beauty; a universe that reflects the glory of God; a universe in which every star shines out God’s attributes; a new earth in which everything is radiant with righteousness and truth; a completely renewed world.

So Peter sets before our eyes a most awesome vision: the vision of this world passing away and a new world rising out of the chaos.

THE NEW FROM THE OLD

Now, an important question arises. The question is this: When Peter says that the old universe is to be destroyed and a new universe born, does he mean that the old universe is completely annihilated? Is the new creation simply a creation ‘ex nihilo’ (‘out of nothing’) – a new world that has no continuity at all with the old? Or is Peter saying that the old world is dissolved down to its most basic elements and then from those elements a new world is shaped – a new world that is the glorious restoration of the old?

Well, the answer is plain. I have already spoken of the new world rising out of the crucible. That is the precise meaning of the puzzling term at the end of verse 10 – ‘the earth and everything in it shall be found’ – as the earliest manuscripts have it. It is a term that is used of metal that has been melted down in the furnace, now being brought

out and reshaped. And that is Peter's picture here – not the annihilation of the universe, but the melting-down of the universe, like gold in a furnace. The fire does not annihilate – rather it burns away all that is corrupt and impure. And then what remains is reshaped as a thing of beauty. There is a real continuity between the old universe and the new – just as there is between the earthly body of the believer and the resurrection body. And indeed, this is the pattern which runs through the whole of God's working: God does not annihilate what he has created and start afresh: rather his joy is sovereignly to rescue, to restore and to glorify what has been ruined by sin.

This universe has been wrecked by sin. The glorious affirmation of Scripture is that this universe is to be rescued. Yes, it must perish in the furnace of judgment, but by God's grace it is to be reborn, fitted to be the dwelling-place of God and of his people.

You see, the destiny of the believer is not to be in some non-physical, immaterial land; rather, we will see this earth, these skies, at last shining out the glory of God, made new by the Lord Jesus Christ. We are looking forward to dwelling on this earth for ever – but this earth made new; transformed beyond our wildest expectations by the work that the Lord Jesus Christ is to do at his return.

MAN CREATED TO RULE

Unless we see this, we fail to see the scope of the plan of redemption. Man's redemption is totally bound

up with the redemption of the universe. This is clear even in the Genesis account of the Fall. The book of Genesis stage by stage describes the creation of the heavens and the earth. But the climax of that work is the creation of man and woman in the image of God, appointed to rule the created order under God. Explicitly man is given dominion over the earth and over the beasts. The plants are given to him to tend and to use for his nourishment. He is commanded to fill the earth and subdue it: to develop all its potential and draw out all its hidden resources. But man's primacy does not end with the earth. He rules the birds that fly in the first heaven. And beyond that, the sun and the moon are set in the sky to give light upon the earth for man's benefit. Even the stars are placed to be signs; markers for man to know the seasons and for days and years. All is created for man and man is the heir of all things.

It is true, of course, that man when he was first created was not immediately and explicitly given authority over the unseen spiritual powers of the heavenly world. And yet the Genesis account does make clear man's supremacy even over those great spirits. It is not for the angels that the universe was created according to Genesis – it is for man. It is not angels who are created to be God's image-bearers: it is man. Adam can be spoken of as a son of God where angels are no more than servants. Yes, it may be true that the son of the household, in infancy may be called to submit to the servants, but his destiny is still greater than theirs. Man as viewed in Genesis is the heir of all created things. Man's destiny is to rule the creation as God's image-bearer.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH

And the testimony of Genesis is that the Fall of man affected the whole creation. The whole of creation is flung into a state of confusion. The earth is cursed and begins to bring forth thorns and thistles. The beasts no longer submit to Adam their king. Disease and decay spread through all the ranks of earthly creatures. Pain becomes the common experience of all living creatures: especially, the propagation of the species becomes a matter of pain. “With pain you shall bring forth children”. The very fabric of the world is altered. Human sin leads to the break-up of the order established even at the very beginning of creation. The division of the waters established at creation, breaks down through the sin of man. That most fundamental cosmic structure is broken and, in Noah’s day, the chaotic flood waters are allowed again to sweep over the earth. The whole earth carries the marks of man’s ruin.

Of course, we know less of the way in which the Fall affected the reaches of outer space. Astronomers do tell us that the solar system bears the marks of great catastrophe – we cannot begin to imagine the disruption the sin of man has brought into the farthest corners of the physical universe. And again, though it is mysterious to us, we know that man’s Fall has brought confusion into the spiritual realms. The Fall of man has precipitated war in heaven. Even there, man’s primacy has been ruined. Man, created to rule the angels and to have everything in subjection under his feet, has become the slave of evil powers; he has allowed the serpent to usurp control over the world. The contrast is brought out plainly, for example,

in Hebrews chapter 2 where the writer first quotes Psalm 8 to show that man's proper destiny was to have all things, even angelic powers in subjection – and then points out that man since the Fall has been held subject to lifelong bondage “by him who has the power of death – that is, the devil”. All is disordered. How fearful, how unimaginable were the consequences of sin – not only for man but for the creation over which man was head.

THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION

So, Genesis declares that man's disobedience has brought catastrophe to this universe – this heaven and earth. But Genesis declares too that God's purpose for man and for creation-under-man was not abandoned. We all know Genesis 3:15. At the very moment God curses the ground, he declares a hope that looks beyond the curse. In the fulness of time, the true human seed will come to fulfil the destiny of man. He will crush the serpent's head. For a time Satan may be allowed to claim dominion over a fallen world but the day will come when he will be stripped of the power he has usurped and man will rule again. All the works of the devil will be undone. That was the first promise and integral to that promise was the prospect of a redeemed world. And I am sure that as that promise was passed on from generation to generation, each generation looked forward in turn to a Redeemer who would rescue not merely individuals but would be the restorer of creation. When Noah was conceived, his godly parents wondered if this might be the promised child: they said, “Out of the

earth which the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands.” That was the hope – that through the Redeemer, the curse that lay upon the earth would be lifted. Eden would be restored. Indeed all the world would become a true Garden of Eden.

This then is the hope that underlies Peter’s vision. That first promise of redemption embraces this universe, this heaven and earth. Christ the Redeemer, the promised seed, must redeem this world.

Dr. Hoekema sums it up like this. He says:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Because of man’s fall into sin, a curse was pronounced over this creation. God sent his son into the world to redeem that creation from the results of sin. The work of Christ therefore is not just to save certain individuals; not even to save an innumerable throng of blood-bought people. The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem this entire creation from the results of sin.”

Now, nowhere is this vision more powerfully expressed than in the familiar verses of Romans chapter 8. Paul declares in Romans chapter 8 verse 17:

“If we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, providing we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it; in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty

of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in the pangs of childbirth together until now."

Paul is "building upon the theology that we have seen in Genesis. Believers form the new humanity; the true humanity. Therefore, they are, as Paul says here – verse 17 – the rightful heirs of God. But what does he mean? If they are heirs, what are they to inherit? Well, the answer is plain in the verses that follow. Believers are the heirs of all creation. All creation is their rightful inheritance. The inheritance that Adam forfeited is theirs by right; they are destined to rule the whole universe as God's heirs. This is the outcome of their union with Christ, the seed of the woman, the second Adam, the true heir. They are fellow-heirs with him. And when believers at last with Christ, enter into their inheritance, what a deliverance it will be for the creation; delivered at last from the hand of Satan and placed again under the rightful heirs: man headed up in Christ. Creation is longing for that day, says Paul. Until then, there is futility – verse 20; decay and bondage – verse 21; groaning – verse 22; these are the things that mark the created order since the Fall – when God's curse subjected the creation to futility. But there will be glory and liberty – verse 21; these are the things that will mark the restored creation when Jesus and his people finally take their rightful place. And notice Paul's emphasis on the whole creation – verse 22. The whole creation has been groaning. The whole creation is to be liberated. Everything in heaven above and earth beneath will share in the glorious freedom of the sons of God. At last a world of harmony and joy unmarred by sin or by pain; a world where all things

reflect the beauty and glory of God. Redemption extends to earth and heavens – to the whole universe.

Paul tells us in verse 23 that as the universe groans, we groan too – waiting for the redemption of our body. Do you see? Our bodies were made of the dust of the earth. They are part of the created universe. And they are going to be redeemed: that is the token that the whole of the created order is to be redeemed likewise.

And what a day of rejoicing that will be. You know the vision of the Psalmist:

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar and all that fills it
Let the field exult and everything in it
Then shall all the trees of the field sing for joy
before the Lord, for he comes,
He comes to judge the earth!”

The Psalmist is looking forward to a day when all creation will share in the joy of God’s people: when even the floods will clap their hands and the hills will sing for joy together. No doubt he is using poetic metaphor but what a glorious reality is revealed in that metaphor: the reality of a liberated creation in which every hilltop, every tree, every star in the sky will be shouting out the glory of God and echoing the joy of God’s people – the true humanity at last coming into their own. When that new world dawns, free from sorrow and decay, the very mountains will be singing for joy. We will be looking up at those mountains and we will be hearing the echoes of our own singing and we will say, “Those mountains are singing for joy – because God has intervened. The promised day of deliverance

has at last fully come!” The Psalmist pictures a world in which everything – floods fields and hills – repeat the sounding joy.

And of course, if the inanimate creation can be described as singing and clapping its hands, how much more the animal creation! People have sometimes asked me if there are going to be animals in heaven. There must be if we take seriously Genesis 1 to 3 and then Romans 8. If it is this creation that is going to be liberated and restored, how could there not be? Adam was created not to rule an empty world but to stand at the head of an unimaginably complex empire of birds and beasts and other living things. The angels were created to be servants to man, the beasts to be his playmates. Man is never fully himself apart from that ordered hierarchy. And on the other side, there is no way the beasts can be truly themselves other than under the wise dominion of restored man. Man gave names to all the animals: it is in relationship with man they take on individuality and meaning.

And when at last Eden is restored, then at last we shall see that destiny fulfilled. Man will at last rule over an animal creation set free – over beasts which at last find true identity by their submission to God’s image-bearer. You remember again the prophetic vision of Isaiah. Isaiah cannot conceive of the Messianic salvation not extending to the animal creation: “The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the goat. The calf and the lion and the yearling together and a little child shall lead them.”

It is under the dominion of man that the wolf is delivered from its savagery and the leopard from its ferocity to become what wolves and leopards should be!

“The cow shall feed with the bear; their young shall lie down together and the lion will eat straw like an ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain”.

A restored animal creation: tigers more burning bright, more terrifying than they could ever be in this fallen world – but now giving all their strength to the service of Man; dogs more affectionate and more loyal, finding even greater joy in serving their masters; each creature fulfilling its true created identity in a restored universe. C S Lewis puts it marvelously well. He speaks of God granting a body to the Lion: “a body no longer living by the destruction of the lamb, yet richly Leonine in the sense that it also expressed whatever energy and splendour and exulting power dwelled within the visible lion on this earth”. And he adds: “I think the lion when he has ceased to be dangerous, will still evoke awe: indeed, that we shall then see that of which the present fangs and claws are a clumsy and satanically perverted, imitation.”

The animal creation has shared our fall and our bondage but now at last the animal creation will be set free to share the joy of the children of God.

Now I am not saying that particular, individual animals that have lived here in this world are to be resurrected to live in that new world. But I am not denying it either. It does seem to me at least possible, that there are some individual human beings who are perhaps no longer complete without that relationship of dominion over particular creatures that have lived with them. It is not, to me at least, inconceivable that the resurrection of

believers may involve the resurrection of creatures that have shared the life of those believers. But that is no more than speculation and please do not question me about it. Go away and argue instead with C S Lewis who first drove my thoughts in that direction – you will find the question discussed in his chapter on Animal Pain in “The Problem of Pain”. But as far as the more general question goes: Is there to be in any sense a restored animal creation? – then let me emphasize again that that seems to me the unavoidable implication of Paul’s emphasis on all creation – the whole creation – here in Romans 8.

MAN SHALL RULE IN GLORY

So, you can see that my expectation of the glory to come is very much linked with this world. The world to come, is not some vague domain in the clouds. Rather, it is a real world full of colour and beauty: majestic and wonderful creatures, rivers and waterfalls and great mountains. It is a world where man is at last exercising dominion according to the mandate given at the beginning. At last man in Christ will truly subdue the earth and bring forth all its potential. Who knows what feats of architecture and engineering will be possible for man then? Man will be working free at last from the limitations imposed by sin. He will be working under the headship of Christ. He will no longer be fighting against a hostile environment but he will be acting with the co-operation of all creation. Who can imagine the music that will be performed and sung in that new earth? The instruments on which we play today are made of materials that share the effects of the

curse. But that will not be the case in the new world that is coming. And if composers and musicians depraved by sin can produce works so full of beauty here, what sort of works will be written by redeemed believers whose hearts are full of the vision of God's own beauty in Christ?

Again, let me use Hoekema's words:

"Will scientists continue to advance in technological achievement, will geologists continue to explore the riches of the earth, and will architects continue to build imposing and attractive structures? We do not know. But what we do know is that man's dominion over nature shall then be perfect. God will then be magnified in our culture in ways that will surpass our wildest dreams."

That last sentence is, I think, important. 'God will be magnified in our culture.' I remember once I was preaching on these things and afterwards one of the men approached me and what he said approximately was this. He said, "But I thought our role in glory would be to worship." And I agreed with him. But I also agree with Anthony Hoekema that we will worship our God with all that we are: we will magnify him in our singing and our building and our exploration of the created order. We will do all things in order to bring glory to God and in order to show forth his beauty in all nature.

And of course, we will find unimaginable joy and delight in the restored creation. Here, in this world, there are times when created things fill us with unfathomable joy. There are times when great music moves us to ecstasy. There are times maybe when we are out walking and we are confronted with a landscape so beautiful that it almost hurts: we cannot bear to turn away and leave it. Created

things can give us joys that are almost too acute to be borne. And yet, we are only seeing and experiencing the created order in its ruin. What will it be like in that new heavens and new earth when the glory of God is shining out unveiled, from every particle of created being; when the beauty of God is echoing in every sound; when at last we enter into our full inheritance? We are to inherit this restored creation! All things are ours – says Paul. Everything in the created order that can give delight will then be ours.

COSMIC HARMONY UNDER THE MAN CHRIST JESUS

So our vision is nothing less than a redeemed world under the dominion of a redeemed humanity. But we have not yet considered the most awesome aspect of this redeemed cosmos. If we turn to the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1, we see there spelled out God's ultimate purpose for the universe. Verse 9:

“God made known to us his purpose, the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head, even Christ.”

Paul speaks of the consummation – the day when the times will have reached their fulfilment – verse 10. And what is God's purpose for that day? It is this: He is going to bring all things in heaven and on earth together, under one Head, even Christ. That is the term he uses in verse 10. It is a pity it has been obscured in, for example, the AV

and NKJV. Paul uses the term deliberately. All things – the universe – are to be brought together under one Head – even Christ.

We have already seen that the most fundamental consequence of the Fall, for the universe, is that it has been plunged into conflict and confusion. It is a place of broken harmony where creatures live by devouring one another; the interests of one creature are constantly at odds with those of others; man himself is at war with his environment; all the proper pattern of relationships between spiritual powers and human beings and beasts has been disrupted. All things in heaven and earth are in disarray. But Paul tells us here that all things are again to be brought into harmony, brought together into unity under a single head – even Christ.

Do you see? What Paul is saying is this. In the end the universe will be like one great body. The different parts of our bodies work together in harmony. They are co-ordinated. They fit together and support one another. And this is possible because there is one head, one mind that directs them all. They are all subject to one will, one purpose.

Now Paul says that is the way the harmony of the universe is to be restored. All things will be under Christ as Head. The will of Christ will bind all the creatures in the universe. Every creature in the universe – whether we are talking about angels or men or lions or seals, or mountains or orbiting galaxies – every creature will live in joyful submission to Christ; whatever exists in this new universe will move at the direction of Christ, because all will be filled with the love of Christ, all will be directed

by the mind of Christ, all will be working to the glory of Christ. All creatures will be brought into right relationship with each other for all will be subject to Christ the Head. That is the cosmic vision of Paul – a universe that has been reconciled, that has been brought together in Christ himself. Paul puts it like this in Colossians: “God was pleased through Christ to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” However far the echoes of the curse have resounded, just as far will the reconciling decree go out. The whole creation, animate and inanimate, is brought together, bonded together in a passion of love, for all eternity.

And so, God’s ultimate purpose for his creation will be fulfilled. We have seen that God’s original purpose was that the creation should be headed up by humanity. Well, that purpose has not been abandoned. The restored universe is to be headed up by God’s people, the true humanity; and the true humanity is to be headed up in Jesus Christ, the true man, the Son of Man.

Now, to understand this a little more, let us return to Hebrews 2 and its exposition of Psalm 8. Hebrews chapter 2 verse 5:

“It is not to angels that God has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: What is man that you are mindful of him; the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels. You crowned him with glory and honour and put everything under his feet.”

Do you see his argument? Remember, he says – verse 5 – it is not angels who are going to rule the world to come. Rather – and this is the point of the psalm – man is going

to rule the world to come. You have put everything under man's feet – verse 8. You have appointed man as King – you have crowned him – verse 7 – with glory and honour and appointed man to rule the whole universe. The writer makes the point at the end of verse 8: In putting everything under man, you left nothing that is not subject to man.

The writer says: ultimately, mankind, human beings must rule the whole created world – nothing is excepted, nothing is left out. But, he goes on to say – still in verse 8 – at the present we do not see everything subject to man. Indeed – back to verse 7 – man's present position is lower than that of the angels. We are at the mercy of all sorts of hostile forces. We do not see Man – even the true humanity – the people of God – enjoying that sort of dominion.

But then he goes on to say this (verse 9): “But”, he says, “we do see Jesus, already crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, because he tasted death for each one who belongs to this new humanity.”

Do you see what the writer is saying? It is the destiny of Mankind to rule the universe and though human beings – even elect human beings – have not yet come into that destiny, one Man has. Jesus, the Son of Man, has already taken his proper place at the head of creation. The eternal Son of God has come down and – verse 14 – shared in our humanity and now as the representative and head of the true humanity, he leads all his brothers, all the elect children of God into the destined glory, into that position at the head of creation which Adam forfeited. He is the ultimate man, the true man, the Man, the heir of all things. That is the structure. Creation, headed up in mankind; and then mankind headed up by the one true Man, Jesus.

Now do you see the extraordinary thing that the writer is saying? We are used to the idea that the Lord Jesus is to rule the universe. But here the writer is emphasising that it is *as a man* that Jesus is to rule the new world that is coming. When the Lord Jesus Christ takes his throne over the redeemed universe, crowned with glory and honour, that crown will be set on a human head. We will look into his face and it will still be the face of a *man*. It is a *man* who is to sit on the throne of the universe for ever. The angels through all eternity will be worshipping a *man* – the man who is also God. Where Adam forfeited dominion, the Man Christ Jesus will rule for ever and ever, as the one who sits at the right hand of the Father.

HEAVEN MEETS EARTH

Christ then is to rule as a Man among men on the redeemed earth. But once we have said that, we have said that the distinction between heaven and earth will no longer mean anything. Sometimes people ask us – it is a favourite question especially with the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses – if we are going to dwell on earth or in heaven. But that distinction will no longer apply. Heaven and earth will be joined in the person of the God-Man. We define earth as the place where man dwells. We define the highest heaven as the place where God dwells – where he has his throne – where his glory is seen. But now, in Jesus Christ, God will dwell with man. So, earth will be the centre of heaven. Earth will become the very throne-room of God, for here on this earth, the glory of God will be seen in the Man who is the visible outshining of all that God is. The

earth and the heavens are united in the One who is both the Lord from Heaven and a Man whose body is truly part of the created order, made of the dust of the earth.

Again, Hoekema puts it perfectly:

“Since God will make the new earth his dwelling-place, and since where God dwells, there heaven is, we shall then continue to be in heaven while we are on the new earth. For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one.”

In John’s vision of the new world, he sees the heavenly city coming down to earth – and he hears a great voice from the throne saying: “Now the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.”

In Christ, heaven itself comes down to earth. In Christ, God himself will be with men for ever. Our ultimate joy through all eternity will be to gaze into the face of God-made-visible: of God-made-man. Here in this world we have loved him without seeing him but at last we shall see him as he is and we shall worship him for what he is. For ever we shall worship the glory of God in the face of the man from Nazareth.

THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

So then, that is the biblical vision of the world to come. Now, having sketched out that overall scenario, we can move on to our second heading – to think more specifically about *the future of the Church*. Now, I trust our fundamental understanding of the place of the church in the world to come has already become clear. The church

is the new humanity, the true humanity that, under Christ, is to head up the restored universe. That was Hebrews 2: humanity is to rule the whole universe. Jesus is the first member of the new humanity – the Head of the new humanity. And ultimately all his brethren, all his children, those who make up the true humanity, are to share his glory. That is the fundamental perspective. But perhaps we can take the argument just a little further.

MANKIND UNITED

Paul as we have seen in Ephesians 1, stresses the unity of the restored universe under the headship of Christ. We have seen the centrality of this idea of unity – of the bringing together again of the created order, fragmented through sin. But now what we must see is the special position of the church in relation to this. In Ephesians, Paul goes on to stress that the first phase of that restoration of unity must be the restoration of unity *to humanity* – to the Church. As we have seen, it is through a restored humanity that Christ is to rule the restored universe. If the universe is to be restored to unity, then first unity must be brought to the divided human race. At the heart of the restored universe is to be the new humanity, restored and reunited in Christ. So Paul goes on in Ephesians 1 (verse 20) to say:

“God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far beyond all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church

which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Paul here again declares that Christ is to be head over everything – verse 22 – his headship is to extend to all creation. But first he becomes head over the church. The church is already Christ’s body – verse 23. One day the whole universe is to become a united whole in Christ: the first phase is to be found in the unity of the Church because the Church has already become the body of Christ. Christ has not yet united the whole cosmos but he has united his own people in the church; he has made himself the head of the people who form his body. One day the whole universe is to be filled with the fulness that flows through Christ the Head but already that fulness is present in the Church.

And so Paul works out this astonishing theme throughout the letter to the Ephesians. What is Christ’s purpose? Chapter 2 verse 15:

“to create in himself one new man – one new humanity – out of the two – from Jew and Gentile – thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”.

The church, as we have said, is the first phase of God’s great reconciling operation. And Paul tells us here that the human race broken and divided by sin is brought together again through Christ. Elect human beings, Jew and Gentile, from every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue are brought together to form the one new man of which Christ is the head and his people are the body – all working together in perfect harmony, co-ordination and love. What has

God done? He has taken men and women from every nation of the world and from every stratum of society, literate people and illiterate people, people from the great cities and people from the jungles – and he has brought them together as one. He has made them interdependent, a community – because he has put them all under the Headship of Jesus Christ. That is why they can co-operate. That is why they can relate to one another and rest upon one another – because they are all linked by the Headship of Christ. Just as my two hands can be co-ordinated, so these people in the body of Christ, are co-ordinated.

Now Paul sees this great work of restoring the unity of man in Christ as having begun here in this world. But he looks forward beyond this world to the new world where the unity of the Church will be complete. “To God be glory in the Church,” Paul cries, “and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever”. The unity of the Church, the new humanity, growing ever richer, ever deeper, is to be a source of glory to God through all eternity. That is the argument especially of chapter 3 verses 9–11.

So when we look forward to the Church’s glorification then the first thing we are looking forward to is that full unity, that perfect harmony that we will have with one another by virtue of our subjection to Christ’s headship. I think it is probably impossible for us to begin to imagine the sort of unity, the depth of harmony that will exist among God’s people in the world to come. Even here in this life, at times we are absolutely thrilled by the tenderness and love and understanding we receive from God’s people. We are moved to wonder and joy by the

level of interdependence and mutual caring that exists within the body of Christ. Even here, marred as we are by sin, we experience a depth of mutual love that the people of the world cannot imagine. But what will it be in the glory to come? When sin has finally been purged away and when every member of the body is truly following the directions of the Head in everything? When every member of the body is to the full becoming the channel of Christ's thoughts, of Christ's will, of Christ's desires, of Christ's affections?

That is the glory of the world to come – that at last every member of the body will be perfectly united to the Head and submissive to the Head. There will be a bond of unity between the Head and the body beyond anything we can contemplate now. And what sort of unity will that bring within the body? Baxter puts it this way. He says this:

“O then, what a blessed society will the family of heaven be, and those peaceful inhabitants of the new Jerusalem, where there is no division, no differing judgments, no disaffection, nor strangeness, no deceitful friendship, no, not one unkind expression, nor an angry look or thought; but all are one in Christ, who is one with the Father, and all alive in the love of Him who is love itself.”

You know, I remember enjoying some years ago a science fiction novel by John Wyndham called “The Chrysalids”. It is a book about a group of youngsters who develop the ability to communicate with one another telepathically so that they can communicate their feelings and their ideas and their thoughts without words. And because of that, the community that exists among those people is something which cannot exist among others. They have a

total sensitivity towards one another. They can fully enter into one another's feelings, and hurts and longings and joys – and what will benefit one another. They do not need even to use words to express their love to one another, so close is their bond.

Well, that is just a story but I believe that may give us a glimpse of what eternity will bring for the church. It will be a community of people bound together for all eternity in a passionate fellowship of love and tenderness and sensitivity and joy and mutual caring; a group of people who for all eternity will live not for themselves, but for one another, because they are under the headship of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ loves every member of his church with a total and passionate and beautiful love and through all eternity, his love will be channelled through every member of the body into every other member of the body. That is the beauty of the world to come – a world in which every one of God's people will say, "I am loved by Christ and I know it because I am loved by every one of his people. I see and feel their total self-denying love. And I love them. I know that the love and understanding I have for them is Christ's love and understanding flowing through me out to them." Christ's thoughts, Christ's love, Christ's desires, pouring out through each member of the body to every other member. Then at last, the church will be a true reflection of God's own triune life. God is three in one. And within the glorious trinity of God's own being, there is perfect understanding, perfect love, perfect harmony between each of the persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit living together in an indivisible union of love

and joy. Well, Jesus prayed for his people, “Father, I pray that they may be one, even as you and I are one”. That is our awesome expectation. It has never been fulfilled here in this world – nor could it be. But God’s people in eternity, under the headship of Jesus Christ are to be one with one another, even as the Father and Son are one. There is to be a bond of unity between God’s people that can only be compared with the love between Father and Son, a love in which there is no moment of doubt or deviation or division. A love that is total and all-encompassing. That is the ultimate glory of the Church – its unity – a unity that reflects the glory and the unity of God himself. The new humanity is to carry the likeness, the image of God for all eternity. The church in its unity is to mirror God in his unity.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Now, it is important, I think, to stress that that eternal unity is to be a *unity in diversity*. That is a necessary element in our likeness to God who is one God in three distinct persons. Here in this world, the glory of the church is not that all its members become identical, but that its members with all their distinctiveness, Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian are one. And Scripture indicates that that distinctiveness is to continue into all eternity. This is, I think, very powerfully brought out in Revelation chapter 7, verse 9: “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count.”

Here is John’s vision of the Church, the whole company of the elect, in glory, an innumerable multitude. And John

tells us that as he looked out, over the company of the redeemed, he could see that they were from every nation, tribe, people and language. Do you see: they still bore the distinctive marks of their origin and identity here on earth – their racial origin, their culture, their language groups; and yet all were one in Christ Jesus? They are still different from each other. Different races, different communities do have distinctive physical, psychological, social, cultural, linguistic features. And these are not obliterated in the world to come – rather, they are transcended in the unity of the church. All that was sinful and degraded; all that was a denial of the likeness of God in any culture will have passed away; but anything in the identity of any nation that was a true reflection of the image of God will be retained and glorified and brought for the benefit of the whole united Church. Herman Bavinck wrote: “Not the individual man, and not even man and woman together, but mankind as a whole is the fully developed image of God.” The new humanity can only reflect the image of God fully as each nation, each tribe, each language brings its own distinctive contribution.

In ancient times, it was the responsibility of each of the nations within a great Empire, to bring their most distinctive and wonderful product as tribute to enrich the Empire as a whole. So, it will be in the world to come. Believers from one nation will bring something that no other nation could bring.

This is said explicitly in Revelation chapter 21, where we are told that “the kings of the earth will bring their splendour” – their tribute – “into the holy city.” Verse 26:

“The glory and the honour of the nations will be brought into it.” Now that city represents the community of God’s people, gathered together as one. It is identified in verse 9 as being the Bride of Christ. And now John shows us the leaders of each nation bringing their distinctive contributions to enrich the life of the whole. This must surely mean intellectual and cultural contributions: one nation excels in philosophical and analytic thought; another in poetic and oratorical genius; another in musical talent. It may mean technological and scientific aptitudes. All that is richest and best in the physical or emotional or intellectual or cultural life of any nation will be brought to the glory of the King and the service of his gathered people.

This is, to my mind, a thrilling testimony to the wisdom of our Redeemer God who does not obliterate the consequences of the Fall but rather takes up those consequences and works them into a more glorious and beautiful pattern. How were the nations of the earth first formed? Well, it was by the rebellion at Babel. Yet the distinctiveness of those nations is not obliterated in the eternal order: rather it is taken up and woven into the eternal purpose.

Unity in diversity – that is the nature of the Triune God and that is to be the eternal joy of God’s people. And of course, that diversity is not limited to the diversity of nations. What a diversity of individuals will be there in that new world. And I believe each person will bring his or her unique contribution. There will be things which only you could contribute to the life of the community, which no-one else could contribute. Within this body of

mine, each tiniest part has its own unique role. And in the Body of Christ, eternally, each member will have its own unique, perfect contribution to make. In the great eternal song that is to be sung around the throne of the Lamb, there is a part that only you can sing! You will bring experiences that nobody else can bring. When the song of glory goes up and each person declares what Christ has done and why Christ should be honoured, there will be things you will be able to talk about that nobody else could talk about. You will be able to say, “Christ forgave me for this. Christ cleansed me from that” – and nobody else will be able to say exactly the same thing – nobody else will be able to bring that particular word of praise to the Lord Jesus! Every voice will sing in perfect harmony with every other voice, but every voice will be distinctive. There will be a uniqueness in the experience of each glorified saint

C S Lewis says: “Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it.” And he speaks of heaven as a place where our joy is “the continually successful, yet never completed, attempt by each soul to communicate its unique vision to all others.”

The church here on earth has many sins and many failings. It is sadly marred and fearfully fallen: it is defiled by heresy and scarred by lovelessness. But in glory, we shall see the Church as a fit bride for the Lord Jesus Christ, a bride beautifully decked for her husband, a church that both in its individual members and in its corporate life perfectly reflects the beauty and glory of the Triune God.

THE FUTURE OF THE BELIEVER

So thirdly and finally, we come to the question of the individual believer, in this new world. What is our life in that new world going to be like?

I intend to be very brief in this last section: in fact, I only really want to take up one aspect. Our life in that new world will be life *in the body*. It is, after all, to be a real world – not merely some subjective experience, but a real place. And we are to receive real bodies appropriate for our new home.

This is of course, dealt with most fully in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 where Paul insists so strenuously on the resurrection of the body over against the spiritualising of the Corinthians who no doubt believe in an after-life, but find it hard to believe that the body is to be raised. Paul insists that our bodies are to be raised, even as the body of Jesus was raised. He died, he was buried and the body that was buried was raised again. It was transformed and glorified but it was a real body; and in that respect, Christ was to be the first-fruits 1 Corinthians 15, verse 23: As Christ's body was raised, so the bodies of those who belong to him are to be raised at his coming.

Now Paul is aware that many people are going to be very puzzled by this teaching and so therefore he says in verse 35: "But how are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" People still ask the same sort of questions. But Paul to all such questions, simply says in verse 36: "How foolish! What a silly question – because it is a question to which you cannot possibly imagine the answer. All you do know, (he says) is that those bodies will

be amazingly different from the bodies that we now have. They will be as different as the difference between a seed and a full-grown plant!”

A farmer drops a seed into the ground – and it is a tiny, wrinkly, little thing – and then that seed decomposes and germinates in the ground and then some time later you begin to see a plant breaking through the soil and sprouting out; and that plant, in all its beauty, has come out of that little seed. There is a real continuity between them. But how utterly different they are! How astonishingly the seed has been changed! So, at the coming of Christ, God will mysteriously raise the believer’s body – but what is raised will be wonderfully different from what was sown; transformed into an unimaginable beautiful body – something beyond our wildest dreams.

THE RESURRECTION BODY

Now Paul goes on to draw four contrasts between the body of this world and the resurrection body. Look at verses 42 to 44.

Firstly, *the resurrection body is imperishable*. The body we have now is a perishable body. It gets old and declines in its powers. It is subject to illness and decay – and ultimately it fails entirely. In these ways, it shows the marks of sin. But the body of the resurrection is to be imperishable – it cannot be touched by pain or illness or weariness. It is to be perfect in health and vigour.

And then secondly, *it is glorious*. It is raised in glory. The body that is laid in the grave is a body sown in dishonour.

The weakness and decay we were talking about a moment ago are marks of shame, of fallenness. The uncontrolled impulses, the disproportionate appetites, the chemical imbalances of our bodies that lead to obesity or depression or whatever are all marks of our shame.

But the body of the resurrection is a body of glory. It is a body that will reflect the glory of God himself – a body to delight in. Paul is using the term glory in its fullest sense. For Paul, glory is always God’s glory. Glory is the outshining of what God is, of all his attributes: his wisdom and power and majesty and holiness. And Paul is here declaring that our bodies, the very frame in which we will walk the new earth, will be bodies that shine out the glory of God, that reflect God’s own beauty. The angels will look into the face of resurrected believers and they will fall back dazzled because they will see those faces radiant with the glory of God.

And then thirdly, he says *it is a body raised in power*. Everything about our bodies here is weak. There are so many things we long to be able to do. And we are hindered by the limitations of our bodies. The Saviour recognised it when he said of his disciples: “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”. But in that glorious resurrection, there will be no disjunction between our desires and our capacities. You see, in that new world, our one great longing will be to serve Jesus Christ perfectly – and at last we will have bodies fitted to do that. We will have bodies that will never fail us in anything we seek to do for Christ. No more longing to pray but being unable to do so because our bodies are simply exhausted. No more longing to praise but being unable to do so because our heads are aching. No more

longing to think clearly but being unable to do so because our minds are tired. At last, perfect clarity of vision – the ability to think and to choose and to desire with unmixed motives; to be able to make decisions without fear that we are being deceived by the deceitfulness of sin. At last, the power to be all that we have longed to be – pure and holy and a delight to our God.

And then finally, Paul says *it is a spiritual body*. The body that dies is a natural body but the body that is raised is a spiritual body.

Now, when Paul says this, he is certainly not saying that the resurrection body is some sort of phantasmal, ghost-like, intangible, non-material thing, any more than the resurrection body of Jesus was. No, when Paul uses the word “spirit”, he is certainly not thinking just of spirit with a small “s”. He is saying that this is a body filled with the Spirit of God. It is a body drenched through with the reality of God himself. Paul, elsewhere, in Ephesians, uses the most startling language to describe the ultimate destiny of the believer. He says that we are to be filled with all the fulness of God. The fulness of God’s own being is to be focussed in our bodies. The universe is to be filled with the fulness of God. The church is to be filled with the fulness of God. And the focus of it all is that the body of the individual believer is to be filled with the fulness of God. Our bodies are to be radiant forever with the presence and power of the Spirit. In the world to come, we shall be filled with the Spirit, without measure. That is our great expectation: the full experience of the Spirit! To be utterly controlled by the Spirit, to have our hearts and our minds governed by the mind of the Spirit, to become the channels by which the Spirit flows out to all the universe.

Scripture speaks of the marriage of the Church to Christ – a union of ecstatic intimacy between Christ and his people. But how are we to experience this union? We experience it by the eternal indwelling of the Spirit of Christ. We will know God the Father, through our union with God the Son, a union made real in our experience by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's words can be summed up by saying that our bodies are to be like Christ's body. "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but when we see him, we shall be like him," says John. And Paul puts it like this in Philippians chapter 3. "We are waiting for our Saviour from heaven, who will transform our lowly bodies so they will be like his glorious body".

There are times when we feel utterly ashamed of ourselves. We feel ashamed of our bodies – but that is a trivial matter. More than that, we feel ashamed of ourselves, of what we are. We feel at times so sordid and soiled and ugly – not just physically but inwardly. We feel that the shame of our body reflects the real shame of our souls. But one day we shall be like Christ himself. One day, you are to be beautiful as the Lord Jesus is beautiful – in body and in soul. If you belong to Christ here, you will be reflecting the glory of God, even as Christ does – Christ's purity, Christ's beauty, Christ's tenderness and love are to be yours eternally.

The ugliness that has been ours since the Fall is to pass away in a moment of time – Paul says, "In a flash in the twinkling of an eye." C S Lewis compares it to that marvelous moment when a man after a hard day can strip off his sweaty, foul clothes and plunge into a bath.

What will it be for us to strip off these bodies of humiliation and be clothed in the body that is righteousness and peace and eternal beauty? What will it be for us in that great moment when at last we see Christ face to face and are made like him?

These things are already dawning on us. The whole New Testament is dominated by the thought of ‘the already, but not yet.’ The eternal joys are to be the consummation of what we have *already* begun to experience. Here in this world, we are *already* beginning to taste something of the joys of the world to come. The Holy Spirit who is to transform the universe and the church and our own vile bodies is *already* dwelling within us and is remaking our souls. Our souls have *already* discovered the reality of the new creation. If any man is in Christ, he *already* belongs to the new creation, says Paul.

PREPARING FOR GLORY

Now, that thought ought to fill us with great assurance and joy. But, let me say too, before I finish that it should also cause us to pause and to examine ourselves. We have seen that at every point, there is the most definite connection between this world and the world to come. It is here in this world that we are being prepared for glory. The New Testament makes it plain in so many ways that our eternal joys are forged out of our works here in this world. The New Testament writers are not afraid to speak of rewards in the world to come. Christ speaks of our laying up treasures in heaven by our works here on earth. Let me just give three or four examples of what I mean.

Firstly, think of *our relationships*. We have already seen that relationships with other believers are at the heart of the eternal joy. But those relationships are begun here in this world. Paul tells us that his converts are to be his joy and crown. Christ tells us that by wise use of our money here we can win people who will then be eternally our friends to welcome us into our eternal dwellings. A man who has lived his life for others here will eternally have the reward of their gratitude, their special love – the knowledge that he has been used for their blessing. Baxter says: “Consider what a joy it will be in heaven, to meet those whom you have been the means to bring thither.” A believer who lives selfishly here is not only forfeiting friendship here: he is forfeiting that eternal reward.

Again, think of the matter of *gifts and talents*. The Saviour teaches explicitly that it is by faithful use of talents here in this world that we are prepared for greater usefulness in the world to come. “You have been faithful over a little,” says the Master, “I will set you over much.” A man is given abilities here in this world – they may be intellectual, or physical or artistic or personal. Out of obedient love for Christ, he develops those gifts; he learns to use them skilfully. Well then: he will carry forward those skills – it will be forever his joy to use in the service of Christ, the skills he has learned here in this world. Scripture portrays heaven as a city. Paul Helm says:

“A city is a complex social organism and organisation in which people co-operate using their different skills... The personalities of the heavenly citizens will have been partly formed by their service as earthly citizens...

They will bear some relationship to the manner and faithfulness with which they have carried out their daily callings.”

And then, thirdly, think of *character*. Our characters are shaped by our lives here on earth. Through mental and physical and spiritual activity, through determination and perseverance and suffering, a man’s character is deepened and developed. He is delivered from superficiality and shallowness. He becomes a bigger character – capable of bigger experiences, bigger joys, bigger insights. Even here in this world it takes a bigger character to appreciate the delights of great music than the trivial pleasures of a television soap series. Now, every single thing I do, every word I speak, every thought I meditate on, to some extent changes my character, my personality. And my capacity to enjoy the blessings of the world to come depends on the character which I carry forward into that world. Baxter again speaks of the “perfect, endless enjoyment of God by the perfected saints, according to the measure of their capacity.” Every saint, in the world to come will be as full of joy as he is capable of being. But some saints will be more capable of joy than others. “... thou shalt then have full joy, as much as thou canst hold, and more than ever thou thoughtest upon.”

And then fourthly and finally: think of *service*. Paul tells us explicitly that by our service we are building for eternity: one man builds with wood, hay and stubble: his work vanishes in the fire of judgment day. Another man carries forward with him into eternity, gold silver and precious stones. “If any man’s work abides...” A man gives himself in unceasing and painful service to Christ. What

will be his eternal reward? Surely it is this – the eternal joy of knowing that he pleased Christ; that he served Christ; that he glorified Christ; that he upheld the honour of Christ when Christ was despised and rejected. We have only one chance to serve a despised Christ, an ignored Christ – and that is here in this world. It will be the joy of the faithful believer to know through all eternity that he stood by Christ in the hour when Christ was unrecognised and hated. “Well done, good and faithful servant” – to have heard that will be eternal joy.

We have heard the accusation so often. We are told that Christians are “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that it is only understanding the doctrine of the world to come that will give us strength to be faithful in this world: to build costly relationships with ungrateful people; to go through the painful toil of developing gifts and skills; to persevere in mortifying sin and building Christian character; to serve Christ often without encouragement or apparent results.

The Bible *tells us* to be heavenly minded! “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:2–4). And, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

May the Lord make us increasingly heavenly minded – and enable us to live as those whose true home is in the coming new heaven and new earth.

